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Florence Hurd CURSE OF THE MOORS

**The young bride was
caught in a whirlpool of
passion, treachery and death.**

TOMB OF EVIL

Beautiful, tempestuous Zillah Ashland was the product of a tangled and tragic lineage. Her mother had perished in the agonies of childbirth, and her father, a drunken, embittered man, had died in the violence he embraced. Alone, in a weathered hut on the English moors, Zillah grew to womanhood.

Then she met Captain Richard Cates, a handsome, loving man, and was swept away to his sprawling, ancestral home. But just when she felt her fate had changed, Zillah was drawn into deeper terrors. For the house was a tomb of evil, and encased in its dank, dark hallways was a curse more horrible than death.



KING SIZE GOTHICS

are the finest novels of romantic suspense available today. Each is carefully selected to be a better value in its content, length and style.

Howe Dene,

THE PRESENCE OF DEATH

I had the sensation that someone had suddenly opened a door. An ice cold draft blew across the back of my neck, raising the hairs on end. I looked around, but there were no open doors. The invisible current of air might have come from the fireplace, though it did not smell of ash or chimneys but more like the pungent odor of wind blowing over freshly-dug earth. The same as an open grave, I thought, and shuddered.

I heard a rustling sound, like the crumpling of paper. It seemed to come from one of the deep shadowed corners, and then all was silence again.

I listened for a moment longer. Nothing. I shrugged and then—I never knew why—I looked up.

The blood congealed in my veins.

There, looped over the rail of the gallery, was a rope dangling downward; a rope with a hangman's noose at the end. Slowly, it swung back and forth, back and forth, like the pendulum of a clock—slowly, evenly, as if it were evil, evil and alive.

A MANOR BOOK.....1975

Manor Books Inc.
432 Park Avenue South
New York, New York 10016

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Printed in the U.S.A.

Chapter 1

My jailers told me I was to die.

Those who would have helped me were far distant, unaware of my plight and it was futile to look to the country folk outside those walls for aid. "Witch" they had once called me, "sorceress," whispering one to the other, "Ah, have you heard? She is known as the witch of the moors."

Untrue. All of it was untrue. As God is my witness I am no witch, no sorceress. I have no magical talents, no "evil eye," no diabolical powers. That I sometimes see things in dreams, events that are happening or will happen miles away, I do not refute. Nor do I deny that I have a special way with animals. But does this make

me a daughter of Satan?

Though the charge against me is monstrous, insane, strangely enough it is not for witchcraft. That I might have understood. But how should I have ever guessed that the mere fact of my existence would bring this calamity upon my head?

I had much time for contemplation during those long anxious hours and my thoughts had turned more and more to my early years—and to Grandmama. I wish with all my heart that she could have been with me then, for I was beginning to feel that I no longer had the strength or the cunning to fight my enemies. Perhaps she would have been dismayed at my lack of courage since she taught me early to fear nothing, neither man nor beast. But how does one face death with equanimity? How must one look upon the end when one has lived so short, too short a time, scarce eighteen years?

Grandmama. If she could only give me the answer, she who knew so much, who instructed me not only in courage, but in all the lore of nature, from the names of the stars in the heavens to the lowliest plant on the moor. From her I learned how to read and to write, to cook and to sew. Growing up, she was the only family I knew. I have no recollection of my parents. My mother drew her last breath when I was barely two days old, and my father shortly thereafter, unable to cope with a bawling, hungry babe brought me to his mother's place—Grandmama's lone cottage on the moor, five miles from the village of Byrnne. Within a year my father

died too, killed during a brawl in a London tavern, leaving me nothing but my name, Zillah Ashland, the same as Grandmama's and a heritage that was dark and tangled. These things, however, I did not learn until many years later, and then only after some prodding on my part, for Grandmama was reluctant to speak of them.

But in those early days as a child I did not think much of where I came from or why. It was enough to wake each morning to the pungent scent of coffee brewing on the hearth, to the sound of the tap-tapping of the climbing rose vine outside my window and Grandmama's gentle urging, "up Zillah, time to get up."

What mattered the tedious chores I had to get through before lunch when the whole of the afternoon was my gift, an afternoon free to roam the moor at will? As soon as one o'clock washing-up was done I would throw on a shawl, or if it was summer, the old fashioned bonnet I kept on a peg behind the door, and bring the pony from the lean-to, mount him and ride out of the yard. Some days we rode East, some days West, sometimes choosing no particular direction we cantered the far flung paths at random. It did not matter, for there was always something new and exciting to see whether the moor was lashed by winter rain, or blooming lavender and yellow in spring or lazily drowsing under a summer sun.

Grandmama was well known for her herbal brews and ointments, so, though we lived alone, isolated by several miles from the nearest dwelling, we did have an occasional visitor. It

was always a woman, sometimes two of them together. She, or they were received in the parlor (an addition to the cottage, as was my bedroom, since I had come to live with Grandmama). Cloaked or muffled in shawls the women would knock at the door rather furtively, seeking a potion or a remedy to cure some sickness. Grandmama swore by her remedies, but she herself took no stock in love philters. I remember once how she laughed after the mayor's daughter left, hiding a vial of Grandmama's making in her muff. "She will need more than that to catch Squire Higgins." But she saw no harm in it. "If it gives her courage to pursue him, why not?" she added.

I think I must have been eight or nine when I first began the questions which Grandmama tried to avoid. We had been to Byrnne that day for provisions—flour and candles—and Grandmama had left me waiting in the cart outside the candle shop when a small boy about my own age wearing a red knitted cap called, "Hey!" I was rather surprised to see him there at the footrail looking up at me, because the children of the village, for reasons I could not fathom, usually shunned us. "You be the gypsy's daughter?" he said, fixing me with round, pale eyes.

Not knowing how to answer, I said nothing.

"Can you tell me fortune?" He held out a grubby hand.

I had watched Grandmama read palms several times so I took his dirt smudged hand in mine and I pondered over it as I had seen her

do, and in a voice, low and serious, said, "I see a long life, a journey with many adventures, and then you shall meet a lovely lady, yellow haired and blue-eyed, who shall become your wife."

He snatched his hand away at that. "I don't want a wife," he cried angrily. "I want to be a sojer for the Queen. Gypsy! You be a liar! Gypsy . . . gypsy!" he taunted, then ran off.

When Grandmama emerged from the shop and seated herself in the cart I said, "Are we gypsies?"

She gave me a withering look. "We are not."

"Then who are we? We do not speak like the others."

"That is because we have some learning."

"Did my father have learning . . . and my mother, too?" Like so many solitary children I sometimes had the fantasy that I was a foundling, my real parents having been a prince or princess in a fabulous far-off kingdom.

But Grandma punctured that notion then and there by telling me for the first time who my parents were and how they had died.

"What was my mother's name?" I asked.

"Winifred Beckwith," she said, clucking at the pony. We began to move down the cobbled street.

"And her mama and papa?"

"Dead. They died before you were born."

So many deaths—it was all so sad and confusing. As we rumbled along I mused on these kin whom I had never known, never seen.

"Don't worry your head over such matters,"

Grandmama said, smiling and rumpling my hair. "Here . . . I have some business with Magistrate Coombs today and if you are good I am sure Mrs. Coombs will offer you tea while you are waiting."

Magistrate Coombs was very old and not really the magistrate anymore since he had given up his office to a new man some years earlier. But Grandmama often called him by his title out of respect. He was the only friend she had in Byrnne and from time to time she would stop in to see him. What private matters Grandmama had to discuss with Mr. Coombs I never asked, nor did it seem to arouse my curiosity. Perhaps it was because his wife, a stout, smiling soul with a face like a wrinkled apple interested me much more. She not only served a mouth watering plum cake and cups and cups of fragrant tea, but from her limitless store of anecdotes a steady stream of chatter as well. She seemed to have lived in Byrnne forever and to have been acquainted with everyone. So it was natural for me to ask her on that day if she had known my father and mother.

"Bless me, yes," her faded blue eyes twinkled at me. "Squire Beckwith was near ruin once, I recall, but several good harvests came along and he pulled himself right up." She pursed her small mouth and sipped at her tea. "The Squire and Mr. Coombs had a falling out three years before he died. All over a side of beef. And Mr. Coombs such a reasonable man."

Mrs. Coombs had a tendency to answer a question yes or no and then wander off on a

tangent. And not wanting to be rude, to interrupt and bring her back to the subject, I listened while she rambled on.

“Oh . . . and your father. Tobias. Toby Ashland. The Ashlands lived at Moorsend Manor. . .”

“Moorsend?” I could not help my surprise. Moorsend Manor had been boarded up and vacant even before my time. No one lived there now. “My grandmama was an Ashland. Why do not we live there?”

She peered at me over her spectacles and her face suddenly flushed. “Oh, my dear, that was all a long time ago. There was a quarrel there, too and your grandmama preferred to live on the moor. Would you care for another slice of cake?”

I had not got much out of Mrs. Coombs, but since neither of my parents seemed to have had the kind of exotic background depicted in my fantasies my curiosity was satisfied.

It was shortly after this I had the first—at least the first I can remember, of my odd dreams. Grandmama did not seem to think much of my remarkable dreams, although I told her about them often.

However, six months later when the pony ran off and was gone for three whole days and I dreamt he was nibbling grass in amongst Farmer Dowden’s sheep and we found him there, she looked at me with different eyes. We were silent, I remember, all the way back to the cottage, and once inside, she shut the door. “Zillah,” she said, “you must never tell another

living soul about that dream or any like it, should you have another."

"But why?" I asked.

"They shall brand you witch. They will say you are a sorceress. If we were living elsewhere, perhaps it would be different. I am given to understand that in London such dreams, clairvoyance, seances are all the fashion. But not here, not on the moors. We live among superstitious folk, and while the reading of palms and mixing of love philters and medicines are considered gypsy talents by most, there are still some who look upon such as the work of the Devil."

"Why, how foolish!" I said.

She drew her lips into a thin line and nodded. "There is much foolishness in the world, I'm afraid. Come, let us see to dinner."

I think now of Grandmama's words, ". . . never tell a soul," and I wonder if events would have turned out differently had I really heeded them. I do not know.

The clock ticks, the long evening shadows creep over the garden wall. I sometimes think of Wuthersfield—a place that has countless rooms, a house that is huge—the great hall below, alone, would take in the whole of Grandmama's small cottage—and I would gladly give it all, the minstrel's gallery, the carved staircase, the scrollwork, to be sitting down to a supper of wild blackberries and milk, to be rid of the dread, the pain which is like a knife at my throat. For though I continued to have those dreams at rare intervals, never once did I dream of myself, or what my dark future would

be.

On my fifteenth birthday, having outgrown the pony, Grandmama presented me with a mare. She was a spirited young thing with a coat the color of a polished chestnut, and, indeed, that was her name, Chestnut. What a delight she was. We understood one another from the moment I touched her soft nose, her thoughts and mine communicating on a level that would be hard to explain.

I took her out that very afternoon, a warm March afternoon, I recall, the wind fragrant with new green fern and wet earth, the sun a golden haze over the heath. I remember laughing as we galloped across country, Chestnut leaping streams like a hare, the wind tearing loose my bonnet, whipping my long hair behind. I did not pull her up until we reached the top of Cairn Hill, where, gasping for breath, I could look down and see the heath rolling away in shades of green and brown to the horizon. From here I also had a view of Moorsend Manor, and turning in the saddle, I gazed at it, noting at once the thin spiral of smoke curling up from one of its chimneys.

I wondered if someone were living at the Manor again or if a vagrant, perhaps an itinerant peddler had taken possession of the house.

Curious, I rode slowly down. Tethering Chestnut in a copse of firs and ignoring the sign—TRESPASSERS WILL BE PUNISHED—made my way stealthily through the overgrown

hedges toward a side window. The shutters were open and I realized that no straggler would so advertise his presence. My curiosity further piqued, I pressed closer to the window and by standing on tiptoe was able to peer over the sill. What I saw took my breath away. It was not so much the room, as elegant and beautifully furnished a room as I had ever seen, but the man sitting in it which caused me to gasp. He was sprawled in a chair, smoking a cigar and gazing at the ceiling through the smoke, a young man with curling, light brown hair. He had thin, mobile lips, a slightly arched nose and lastly, most strikingly, a black patch over one eye, giving him the look of a handsome, dashing pirate. To say I fell instantly, passionately in love with this unknown man would be providing a name for an emotion I could not then clearly define. I only recall the sudden flaming of my cheeks, the queer excitement which shook inside me, the desire, no yearning to speak to him or touch him, but at least to go on looking at him forever.

So engrossed was I in the scene before me that when the tap on my shoulder came I jumped, stifling a scream, and whirled about. I had the hasty blurred impression of a man's white face sprinkled with freckles before I ducked under his elbow and darted off. Behind me I heard the man calling, his footsteps in pursuit and I flew even faster as a vivid picture of my capture and my ignominious appearance before the new magistrate in Byrnne rose before me. I was close to eluding him, for in those days

I was fleet of foot, but I stumbled over a broken urn and down I went, falling full face in the damp, nubby new grass. I lay for a moment stunned, then scrambled to my feet. Too late.

The man had caught up with me and before I could turn and run from him again, he had hold of my arm. "Are you hurt, girl?" he inquired, not unkindly.

I struggled free.

"Please don't be afraid. I mean you no harm," he said.

He did not sound angry and taking courage from his voice I shook the hair from my eyes and looked at him. He was much younger than I had thought, no more than twenty, perhaps, with reddish hair and a wide forehead, rather homely, except for his blue eyes which now held a hint of a smile.

"I am sorry," he continued in the face of my silent scrutiny. "I did not mean to frighten you."

Encountering such courtesy when it was I who was at fault aroused my suspicion. Why was he so apologetic? Was he, perhaps, a trespasser too?

"May I ask your name?"

"Zillah," I said. "Zillah Ashland," and I tossed my long hair back across my shoulders.

"Ashland? Why then you must be a cousin. I am Malcolm Culpepper." He stretched out his hand.

I looked at him with renewed interest. "A cousin?" I had never heard the name Culpepper but the possibility of finding—at last—some

long lost kin, alive, intrigued me. "Are you sure?"

"My uncle is married to an Ashland, so I am a cousin of sorts, by marriage."

"Oh," I said, disappointed. "Not by blood."

"No." There was a short silence. "I had no idea there were any other Ashlands living hereabouts."

"We live near Fallows Pond on the moor. My grandmother and me."

"And your parents?"

"They are dead."

"So are mine. So you see we not only have an aunt in common, we are both orphans." He smiled, a smile so gentle and sweet it transfigured his homely face.

"Moorsend is going to be lived in again?" I asked, thinking suddenly of the man with the eye patch and wondering where he fit in.

"No, not at present. I am here for a fortnight and then I go up to Cambridge where I plan to read for the law."

"And your aunt and uncle?"

"In Paris. We have, the three of us, been living in Paris ever since I can remember. My uncle is my guardian and he thought I ought to finish my education over here."

"And this aunt—the one we have in common—what is she like?"

"Aunt Faith?" He thought for a moment, creasing his brow. "She's beautiful, very fashionable, so I'm told, and . . . and temperamental."

Temperamental. Grandmama called me that

when I did something which displeased her. I did not think it much of a compliment. "So you are only passing through?"

"Yes. I stopped here because I wanted to have a look at Moorsend, since it's mine."

"Yours?" Malcolm Culpepper was certainly full of surprises.

"It's rather involved. You see," he began earnestly, "Moorsend was entailed. . ."

"Entailed? What does that mean?"

"Entailment defines the limits of inheritance. The land on which Moorsend stands was once granted to the Ashlands with the stipulation that only the eldest Ashland son could inherit and if there was none—why the land and everything on it reverted to the grantee or his direct descendant."

"And you are a descendant?" It was all very complicated and it seemed like an awful fuss to make about a house which, until now, nobody had apparently wanted to occupy.

"Yes, of one Sir Thomas Culpepper. He deeded the property to Hoyt Ashland as a mark of gratitude years ago because Hoyt had saved his son's life during the war against the American colonists."

I digested this for a moment. "And a girl cannot inherit?" I was an Ashland, too, and it seemed very unfair.

"No." Again that sweet smile. "Not if the estate is entailed male, as Moorsend is."

"Well . . . ,"

I said, looking at the house over Malcolm's shoulder, "it's an ugly place. On the outside anyway."

"You've never been inside?"

"No."

"Come along, then, and see."

"I . . . I can't . . . ," I said, suddenly conscious of my torn and muddied skirt, my uncombed hair. "But . . . but. . ."

"But what, Zillah?"

"That man . . . I saw a man sitting in a room. . . ." I waved my hand toward the house.

"Is he . . . is he a relative also?"

"Oh, no," he laughed. "As a matter of fact I hardly know him. He and I got acquainted while traveling in the same train compartment and I invited him to spend the night with me."

"Who . . . who is he?"

"His name is Richard Cates. Captain Richard Cates, and he is on his way to claim his inheritance too; a place called Wuthersfield."

Cates and Wuthersfield.

There it was. In one sentence Malcolm Culpepper had laid out the two names that were to play such a tragic part in my future, laid them out there on that sunny March afternoon like two cards as if he were a teller of fortunes. Two cards. Two black spades.

CHAPTER II

Grandmama was filling the kettle under the pump when I rode Chestnut into the yard. "You are late," she said, and as I dismounted, "What have you done to your skirt?"

"I tripped and fell and . . . oh, Grandmama! You'd never guess, but there are people at Moorsend, a man . . . two men. . ." And I began a jumbled excited account of my afternoon's adventure.

"Hold on, Zillah," Grandmama interrupted before I had gotten very far. "I can't make much sense of what you are saying. Take care of Chestnut, then tidy yourself and we will talk of it over a cup of tea."

By the time I had done as she asked, rubbed

the mare down, changed my skirt, washed and combed, Grandmama had set out the tea things and I was able to sit across from her and in a calmer, more coherent fashion tell her my story. I told her everything, omitting nothing except the strange, wonderful-terrible emotion which had come over me when I looked in at the window and saw Captain Richard Cates. Somehow I did not know how to explain that sensation and I felt reticent, almost shy about trying to. Until now I had shared all my feelings, good or bad, with my grandmother, but it seemed I had come upon one that I wanted to keep strictly as my own.

"Did you know the Culpeppers?" I asked in conclusion.

"I knew your Aunt Faith."

"What was she like?" It was the same question I had asked Malcolm.

"Very beautiful, very spoiled, and the less said about her the better."

"Malcolm isn't spoiled," I said after a brief silence. "He seems very kind and considerate. And he asked if he might come and meet you."

"I see no harm in it," Grandmama said.

"I promised I would take him riding and show him the moor tomorrow, since it is all so new to him."

Grandmama gave me a long look. "I don't know if I ought to allow you to go galloping off with a strange young man."

"Oh, he doesn't seem like a stranger at all. He's a very friendly sort, Grandmama. When you meet him I'm sure you'll agree." I drained

my cup and began the business of fixing myself another; a large dollop of milk, three lumps of sugar and the hot, scalding tea. Next I cut another thick slice of bread and as I lifted it to my mouth I suddenly became conscious that my grandmother had been staring at me all the while. "What is it?" I asked, and when she did not answer, I became a little alarmed. "What is it? Why do you look at me?"

"I have been thinking," she said, at last. "You are growing up now. You ought to be in school."

"School?" I stared at her, astonished.

"Yes. School. I have long since taught you all I know. It's high time you finished your education."

"School. . . , " I repeated, and a vision of the pale, dourfaced village schoolboys trudging home from Reverend Cattlesby's rose before me. "What school?"

"Miss Young's Seminar in Bristol. I went there myself as a girl. It is a fairly good establishment for one of its kind. It will make a lady of you."

"A lady? But you have often scoffed at 'ladies.' You, yourself, have. . . ."

"Never mind about me. For you there is another future, another life. I have been selfish keeping you here all these years. This is no place for you."

"But . . . I *love* it!" I exclaimed, looking round.

"Do you? When you spoke of the room at Moorsend, the piano, the rugs, the china lamps,

I could detect a bit of envy in your voice."

How could I tell her that it was not envy? I had thrown in the description of the furnishings, which had impressed me far less than the man sitting amonst them, merely to fill out my story. "But, Grandmama, what has sending me away to school to do with china lamps?"

"Because that envy, small as you might think it now, will grow and some day you will resent this poor cottage. ."

"Never. . . !"

"Ah—never." She smiled. "Never comes sooner than you think. Yes, you will want to marry like other girls. And though you are quite pretty you cannot make any kind of decent match if you are ignorant, lacking in refinements."

She went on, but I was not listening. Marry! I had never thought of marrying before, but if I should it could only be to someone like Captain Cates. Perhaps going to school was not that bad, after all.

"How long must I be away, Grandmama?" I asked.

"Two years," she said.

"Two years!" I repeated, aghast. That put a far different light on the matter. To be gone from the moor for two whole years! "I shan't go!"

"We shall see," she said, gathering our empty cups with a clatter.

For the next week I put all thoughts of Miss Young's Seminar out of mind. Malcolm came almost every day. Grandmama thought him a

fine young man, and she did not seem to mind our "galloping" off on the moors together of an afternoon, for she never voiced one word of objection.

Malcolm was interested in all I had to show him, where the heron nested, the ancient barrows, most of which had long since been opened, their contents pilfered, the purple bells just coming into bud, Nuncie's Bog, so called because a man named Nuncie had once lost a cow there, and all the little by-ways, the rivulets, the ponds that I had known intimately ever since I was a child. I must confess that my taking Malcolm on this extended tour had an ulterior purpose. I wanted desperately to know anything, everything he could tell me of Richard Cates and I am afraid I must have badgered him unmercifully.

Unfortunately there was not much Malcolm could tell me. Richard Cates, as far as he knew, was unmarried (and how my heart leaped at that), he had lost his eye in some kind of skirmish with natives in the Congo—or was it South Africa?—he had been in the Army and was planning to leave for the Sudan as soon as he had settled his late uncle's affairs.

"He is quite a fascinating character. Very romantic," Malcolm said as we were riding back to the cottage one afternoon. "I can't blame you for being interested."

"Shall he return to England, do you think?"

"He did not say, but I imagine so. Why . . . ,"

he said looking over at me, ". . . I do believe you are in love with the

man." And he laughed.

I blushed, and digging my heels into Chestnut, I took her into a gallop, leaving Malcolm far behind. How dare he laugh! That presumptuous idiot. I would never speak to him again.

But when he arrived early the next morning, saying he was shutting up the house and leaving that day for Cambridge, and shook my hand solemnly, I relented and wished him well.

"I shall write to you," he said.

"Zillah is going to be at school also," Grandmama said, and I looked at her, my heart sinking. She had not forgotten, as I had hoped.

Malcolm must have noticed my fallen face. "Then I shall write to you there. Perhaps come visit you. What school is it?"

"Miss Young's Seminar in Bristol," I said in a dull voice, Malcolm's proposed visit not brightening the prospect one bit.

"Oh, I am sure you will like it," he said, "once you are there."

I did not like it. I hated it. If Grandmama had exiled me to darkest Africa she could not have done worse. I detested Bristol with its narrow crowded streets, its clangor and dirt, its smokestacks. Not even the ships clustered along the docks of the Avon or a glimpse of the sea (which I had never seen) aroused any feeling of admiration. At first sight the school literally appalled me. Housed in an ugly brownstone building, it was separated from the cobbled pavement by an iron picket fence without as much as a scrap of green lawn.

Miss Young, advanced into senility, pink

eyed, dottering about on a cane with a pointless smile on her face was the titular head of the school. The actual headmistress, however, was a Mrs. Brunswick, a tall, thin stick of a woman who was a long way from dottering and who ruled the establishment with an all-seeing, omnipotent eye. She saw to it that "her girls" adhered strictly to rule and there was a rule for everything; every breath, every move we took from the moment we awoke at six until lights out and bedtime at ten. To me who once had virtual unlimited freedom of movement the most painful regulation was the one which forbade us to leave the premises unless accompanied by one of the assistants, and only then on class outings.

How I missed the moors! I thought surely I should die of homesickness that first week and I had all sorts of fantasies in which Captain Cates would come to my rescue. But since Richard Cates was entirely unaware of my existence I abandoned my fantasies for a more practical approach to my problem. I decided to run away, and made complicated secret plans in my head. But as I could not think of anywhere to run to, except home, and I was sure Grandmama would ship me back by the next train, I gave the idea up.

Then it occurred to me that if I acted stupid, if I pretended to be hopelessly unteachable Mrs. Brunswick would throw up her hands and recommend to Grandmama that I be taken out of the Seminar. But it was not easy to appear witless at Miss Young's—and I say this without

any conceit—for there were more than a few pupils, coy, precocious girls in matters of hair-styles, fashion and the opposite sex, who could scarcely write their own names legibly and who could have cared less. So I had to relinquish that plan too.

Next I conceived a notion at the opposite pole: If I applied myself diligently I could absorb all the school had to teach in one year instead of the prescribed two, thus shortening my stay. Grandmama had given me a solid foundation in grammar and literature and history, I discovered, and since I was quick to learn what I didn't know I shot to the top of my class in a very short time. The net result of all this earnest book grubbing, however, was not my release from the hated Seminar, but effusive praise from the usually taciturn Mrs. Brunswick and a snubbing from my fellow students. I had become as unpopular as a weasel at a tea party.

I came back to the Seminar my second year, resigned, realizing there was nothing I could do but dig myself in and make the best of it. Apart from Malcolm who wrote regularly I had no real friends close to my age, until one of my dreams proved instrumental in forming ties with a girl who shared my sleeping cubicle.

Her name was Augusta Cowles and she had been given permission to go home to attend her sister's wedding. On the night before she was to leave I dreamt that the train on which she was riding—the nine o'clock train from Bristol—jumped the track and overturned, killing scores

of people. It was a horrible sight with the steam rising in billows past the crumpled cars and people screaming in agony, Augusta among them.

When I woke in the morning with the terror of the nightmare still upon me I implored Augusta to take an earlier or later train. Fortunately she followed my advice for as it happened the nine o'clock was derailed exactly as I had dreamed except that Augusta had not been on it.

She was much impressed with my "intuition" (I had not told her it was a dream), so much so that she insisted I come home with her for the Easter holiday as her family wanted to meet and thank me personally.

I was disinclined to accept the invitation but when I sent a letter to Grandmama describing the incident, telling her how grateful Augusta was, she wrote back and said of course, I must accept. How would I get to know how other people lived if I kept coming back to the moor? Enclosed was five pounds with which to buy myself a new gown. Five pounds, I remember thinking. Grandmama will spoil me yet.

I can't honestly say that Augusta and I ever became warm, intimate friends. I think envy—on my part—was one of the things that got in the way. For one, Augusta had such a neat, tidy family, a father still young, though going to fat, a mother, blonde and stylish, and two younger brothers who stared at me with round eyes and

unabashed interest. There was the married sister and her new husband, an aunt and uncle too, and a sprinkling of cousins who shared our Easter dinner, all complacent, rather dull people, but even so there was no question of *who* was *who*, or where they came from, no unexplained gaps in familial history.

And Augusta was content with her life. She too, knew exactly what she was and what the future had in store for her. When she finished school she would be "brought out" in London, sponsored by a well-to-do socially prominent godmother. She would meet a suitable man, marry him and in turn have a neat, tidy family of her own. She was not plagued by visions of a handsome, light-brown haired man with a rakish patch over one eye, a man she would never see again, a man who made all others seem like pale, shallow creatures. Augusta was too practical to moon for long over the impossible, and if I had told her of Richard, which I did not, I can guess what she might have said. "A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush." She was full of such banalities.

I don't recall that I was actually unhappy at the Cowles', just envious and a little bored, bored, that is, until the last night of our recess when we were invited to a dance given by a neighbor. It was my first dance, my first ball and I came to it, wakened out of my week long torpor, tremulous, starry eyed, my foot tapping to the violins before my cloak was taken from me. Everything was glitter; the lamps reflected in the polished floor, the jeweled women, the

whirling dancers, even the smiles of the servants who remained discreetly in the background.

I danced every dance, tireless, happy at last after so long a time—in my element. This, I thought, is what I have wanted, what I have missed in the outer world, the silly compliments, my laughter, the whirling, dizzy lilt of the music.

And then during an interlude—we were at the buffet table, I believe—Mrs. Cowles came up to Augusta and myself. “Your cousin, Richard is here,” she said. “Come say hello.”

Not *my* Richard, I thought, turning.

But it was.

I couldn't believe my eyes. It was *him*! Captain Cates! Here? Impossible. I was dreaming a dream from which I would soon awake. But then we were crossing the ballroom floor and he was standing there, surveying the room, a half smile curving his lips, when he suddenly caught sight of us.

We were introduced. He took my hand and gazed at me out of his one eye, a very blue, fierce, almost savage eye. He must have asked me to dance for the next thing I knew his arm was about my waist and we were waltzing, gliding through a world from which everyone else seemed to have strangely vanished. Round and round we went, faster and faster, his magnetic eye never leaving my face, the wide dark pupil reflecting an admiration which was headier than wine.

I am in love with him, I thought, *I am in love*

with this man. I will have him. I must. Surely he feels the same about me?

When the dance ended—much, much too soon—he handed me back to Mrs. Cowles with a polite, “thank you,” and nothing more. There had been no whispered, “I want to see you again,” no formal request of my hostess, “With your permission, may I call?” Nothing. To him I had been a dancing partner for five, perhaps ten minutes, someone pretty to look at, someone who had not stepped on his feet or chattered in his ear, while to me he had been the stuff dreams are made of, a god.

“We must be on our way,” Mrs. Cowles said, herding Augusta and I in the direction of the entry hall. “It is long past midnight.”

I took one last glance over my shoulder. Captain Cates was waltzing with a new partner, a youngish woman with flaming hair and ample, half revealed bosoms. I felt my cheeks go hot and I had the sudden impulse to rush across the floor and kick that red headed woman in the shins. Then, in the next fractional moment, Richard Cates, as if in receipt of my thoughts, caught my eye and smiled.

That smile carried me home.

Later when we were in bed I questioned Augusta about her cousin. She was tired and sleepy and not too inclined to talk but I was not to be put off. “I really don’t know all that much about Richard,” she said. “He’s a cousin twice removed and we rarely see him.”

“But you must know *something*. Is he married?” It had been two years since I had seen

him and he might well have taken a wife.

"No." Augusta said.

"Well . . . what does he do, where does he live, is he engaged?"

"He isn't engaged as far as I know." She punched at her pillows, readjusting them more comfortably. "He's been all over the world. The girls are mad for him, though I've been told their mama's are not. He hasn't a sou, you know. Poor. Lost all his inheritance, I understand, except for Wuthersfield. Gambling, I think. Or was it on some wild goose chase for gold?" She yawned. "I can't remember. Anyway, according to Mama, the only thing for him to do is to marry a rich girl."

My heart turned cold. "Is he looking for a rich girl?"

"Richard?" She laughed. "I doubt *that* one will ever settle down. I once heard him tell Papa that he would rather be a beggar for the rest of his life than be tied to a wife."

I did not know if I ought to feel more heart-sick over Richard Cate's needing a rich wife or not wanting a wife at all. It seemed so hopeless!

We had been back at the Seminar one week to the day when Mrs. Brunswick came up to me in the recreation room and said that Augusta had a visitor, and since she was ill (she was in bed with a cold), he had asked to see me as he had a message from her family.

"He says he is a cousin," Mrs. Brunswick said.

I turned my head away quickly so that she could not notice the sudden flaming of my cheeks. "I'll go down directly," I said in a muffled voice.

"Fifteen minutes," she said. "No longer."

The elderly Miss Young acted as chaperone, as she always did on such occasions, and she jabbered on and on in her deaf, high pitched voice while Richard and I sat mostly silent, exchanging furtive, sly looks. There was no message, Richard finally told me in a low voice. He had used it as an excuse to see me. When he got up to leave he pressed a note into my hand.

I carried the note straight upstairs to the dormitory. "Was Richard here?" Augusta, lying pale and wan on the bed next to mine, asked.

"Yes. He gave me a note."

"What does it say?"

I was reluctant to share it with her, but I did not know how to refuse, so I read it aloud. "Dear Zillah," Richard had written, "Can we meet where we can be alone? In the back garden, perhaps, under the grape arbor, around nine or ten tonight? Richard."

Augusta raised herself on one elbow. "You aren't going, are you?"

"Yes," I said. "Yes, I am, if I can find a way to get out." The school was locked up tighter than a drum at night.

"I know a way," Augusta said. "But I don't think I ought to tell you. You're too nice to be meeting someone like Richard on the sly."

"Oh, please, Augusta, please tell me. I *must* see him. I *have* to. I'll die if I don't."

She sighed. "Very well, but if trouble comes, I want no part of it."

"I promise."

"Celia told me about it. She used to slip out to see a boy she was fond of. There is a door at the back of the kitchen stairs. The scullery maid is supposed to lock it after she has tidied up for the night. Sometimes she forgets."

"I'll use it then."

"*Don't* tell me!" Augusta said, covering her ears with her hands. "The less I know the better."

That night, creeping stealthily down the stairs, I found the door as Augusta had described and luck was with me. The door had not been locked but it screamed so on its hinges when I opened it I was sure that even deaf Miss Young could hear. I waited—my heart going pitapatpitapat—momentarily expecting the clatter of footsteps on the stair and the shocked face of Mrs. Brunswick to appear over the banister. But nothing happened.

I waited another moment then slipped through the door, stepping out into the moon washed, velvet night. And as I peered around me trying to probe the darkness my heart began to beat in a different way. Where was he? Had Richard forgotten our rendezvous? Perhaps he had changed his mind.

I took a few tentative steps when suddenly he emerged from the shadows. I ran to him.

"Zillah!" His hand grasped mine, and then, without a word, he pulled me roughly into his arms.

When at last he let go of me, my head reeling, my mouth bruised, the blood racing in my veins I felt as if there never, never had been a moment in my life such as this.

"Zillah, Zillah," Richard murmured. "Have you thought of me?"

"Oh, yes, yes, yes!" I cried, flinging my arms about him, kissing him on the cheek, on the lips, pressing him closer.

"You *are* beautiful," he said, drawing me into the shadows under the arbor where the stray moonbeams fluttered in silver patterns through the leaves. "Beautiful," he whispered, as he began to undo my cloak.

I gazed up at him enraptured. "Oh . . . Richard, I love you so much."

His hand paused and I could feel a stiffening in his body.

"What is it?" I cried. He said nothing, but in the darkness I was conscious of his stare. "What is it?" I repeated. Had I said the wrong thing when I confessed my love for him? It was not seemly for a woman to do so—I realized that much—but I could not help saying what I felt, not now, not with my whole being overflowing with love.

"I think you had better go inside," he said in a cool voice.

Yes, I had said the wrong thing. I had been too forward, flinging myself at him, kissing him boldly, declaring my love. Men did not like that—Mrs. Brunswick had once said—men did not like women to pursue them. *They* must always be the pursuers.

"Please, Richard," I begged, knowing instinctively that pleading would only make me still less attractive in his eyes. But I had no experience in the coy love games of hide and seek and besides it was too late for that now.

"I was wrong to have you meet me," he said, taking me firmly by the arm. "Suppose you are discovered."

"I don't care," I said, knowing that his belated concern was merely an excuse to be rid of me. "And I don't think we shall be discovered anyway."

But he was already hurrying me across the yard. "Shall I see you again?" I asked, fighting tears.

"I think not," he said. And then he was gone.

So it was over, done with, my wild, passionate love affair, over before it had hardly begun. Numb with disappointment, feeling cheated, angry, hating Richard yet loving and wanting him still, I crept upstairs to bed where I silently cried myself to sleep.

The next morning I made up some falsehood for Augusta, I can't remember what—swore her to secrecy and carried my despair like a hair shirt next to my heart.

It seemed to me that in that short half hour in the garden I had grown infinitely old, and now the days and the years stretched ahead of me, empty, boring, somehow to be filled with a thing called living. Such was my exaggerated misery that I did not think anything could ever make me laugh or cry again.

But I was mistaken.

Four nights after the disastrous rendezvous with Richard in the back garden I had a horrifying nightmare. I dreamt that a man in rough, rustic clothes was stealing up to our cottage on the moor in the dead of a moonless night. He disappeared in the shadow of the eaves and the next moment the cottage burst into flames. I cried out in my sleep, but no sound came. And then I saw Grandmama's face with a look of indescribable horror suddenly appear amidst the flames. I screamed again and again.

A hand was shaking me and suddenly I was looking up into Augusta's white face. "Did I scream?" I asked.

"No, but you were thrashing about and mumbling so it frightened me."

I sat bolt upright. "Augusta, I have to get to Grandmama. I have to warn her . . . there is going to be a fire. . ."

"How do you know?" she asked, her eyes growing large in the dim light.

"I . . . I just *know*. I must leave at once."

"But it's one o'clock in the morning. Mrs. Brunswick. . ."

"I don't *care* about Mrs. Brunswick. She wouldn't allow me to go anyway, especially if I told her. . ." I slipped out of bed and began to pull on my shift, my petticoat. "I'll use the door behind the kitchen stairs."

"What if it's locked?" Augusta wanted to know.

"Then I'll think of something else."

But, thank God, the door was not locked and

I quietly eased myself out unseen. I walked all the way in the darkness to the station, torn between terror of the deserted streets, the shadowed, half hidden doorways, and terror that I should be too late.

Sometimes when I had that sort of dream, the time gap between my dreaming an event and its coming true might be a few hours or a few days. I prayed that this dream be the latter, for I could not hope to reach Byrnne until mid-day and that only if I was lucky enough to catch the train for Castlebridge at once.

The train was an hour late, but I boarded it thankful that my wait had not been longer. I received many suspicious looks and curious stares, but no one questioned me. There was some delay at Castlebridge before I could hire a conveyance to take me the last few miles to Byrnne. I finally managed to arrange with a drover to make the trip, a loutish man who kept looking at me whilst he wet his lips with a moist tongue. I set him right, however, at the outset, telling him he best mind his manners or I could clout him one with my bag, and then he turned surly. I wanted him to take me straight to our cottage, but this he refused to do, dumping me unceremoniously at Mr. Coombs' door.

Mr. Coombs himself answered my knock, and when he saw me his lined, bearded face turned ashen. "My dear Zillah, my dear. . ." He took my hands in his icy ones. "I have just sent a telegram to the school. Something terrible has happened. Your grandmama. . ."

"She's dead," I said in a dull, strained voice. "They've killed her."

CHAPTER III

Mrs. Coombs, murmuring and clucking sympathetically, bustled me into her crowded, airless parlor and sat me down. "Dear," I heard her whisper to Mr. Coombs, "have Meg bring in a fresh pot of tea."

I did not cry. I seemed beyond tears, beyond grief, walled in by guilt, a painful, sharp toothed guilt which kept gnawing at my breast. I had arrived too late. Grandmama had been the one person in the world who loved me, the one person who cared deeply, my mother, my father, my friend. And I had not been able to save her.

While I drank my tea—still dry eyed—Mr. Coombs told me what happened. "A passing

tinker on the moor saw the fire from a distance. But by the time he reached the cottage the thatch had caught and there was nothing he could do except stand by helplessly. It was he who knocked on my door around two in the morning to tell me of it."

I nodded. There was a long silence broken by the rattle of a tea cup, by the measured clacking of the old pendulum clock in the corner. Someone passed below the window whistling.

Neither the magistrate nor his wife had asked me why I had suddenly appeared at their door with the knowledge of my grandmother's death and with the strange accusation, "they've killed her," but I knew they were wondering. And I felt I owed them an explanation.

"I had a dream," I said, "in which I saw it all. The flames and her dying and I thought if I got here. . . ." I paused, looking from one to the other, waiting for some exclamation of disbelief. But there was none.

Mr. Coombs drew his white brows together. "Yes—I've heard of such dreams. But, Zillah, you must not blame yourself. God works in mysterious ways."

Drawing a long breath, I said, "I don't mean to be disrespectful, Mr. Coombs, or to bandy our Lord's name in vain, but it wasn't God who set that fire. In my dream I saw a man dressed in the clothes of a farmer touching a flame to the roof."

He tugged at his long, white beard for a moment. "You recognized the face?"

"His face was in shadow. But . . . it must

have been someone in the village, someone who had a grudge against my grandmother."

He fingered his beard again, thinking.

"Perhaps the man had a sick child," I went on, "and his wife had come to Grandmama for a cure and then the child had died."

"Glen Maddon's little girl died just last week," Mrs. Coombs said, her stays squeaking as she reached to pour me another cup of tea.

"There . . . you see. . . ," I said. "Glen Maddon was angry and he sought revenge."

Mr. Coombs shook his head. "My dear Zillah, I can't accuse a man simply on the basis of a dream."

"And if you asked him, of course he would deny it," I said bitterly.

"Oh, Zillah, Zillah, if there were anything I could do, I would," he said, reaching over the tea table and grasping my hand. "But I think you misjudge the folk here. For the most part they respected your grandmother. Grudgingly perhaps, but they respected her."

Though I found that hard to believe I said nothing.

In the morning I insisted on going out to the cottage, in spite of Mr. Coombs attempts to dissuade me. "What good would it do?" he asked. "There is nothing there. You will only feel more sorrow, more pain. I have already had your . . . your grandmother arranged for burial."

But go I would, and he, kind man—God bless his soul—went with me. The cottage was a charred ruin. Nothing but the doorway had re-

mained standing. Even the lean-to had been reduced to rubble, and in the conflagration my Chestnut, my darling Chestnut had perished. The blackened, scorched earth was like an ugly scar, a wide, obscene place, marred and tainted amid the waving gorse and heather.

I picked my way through the debris where an occasional ember still smouldered, looking for a small memento, a trinket of Grandmama's that might have survived. A glint of gold caught my eye and stooping I picked up an earring, one of a pair my father had given her, but which she seldom wore. I held the earring in my hand, gazing at a portion of the outer wall lying at my feet. There were letters on it, scrawled crudely in chalk, some of them blackened, some obliterated, but the message was still clear. DEATH TO THE WITCH OF THE MOORS.

"Do you see that?" I pointed.

Mr. Coombs came forward. "Indeed I do. And I shall report it to our new constable."

"Do you believe me now?"

He looked very worried. "I never doubted you, my dear. But you see, it might have been anyone. . ."

"Yes, anyone," I repeated. "They hated her, didn't they?"

Mr. Coombs patted my arm. "There now, Zillah. Your grandmother was an extraordinary person. A warm, intelligent, kind woman. And she would not have wanted you to waste yourself in bitter acrimony. Come alone, now. Your grandmother left a will and I should like you to see it."

"A will?" I asked, looking around at the fired ruins. "There is nothing left to will."

"You will be much surprised."

As we turned to go, I stumbled over something at my feet and looking down, saw it was Grandmama's favorite iron kettle, the one she used to boil water for our morning coffee and afternoon tea. And it suddenly struck me with the swiftness of a sharp edged knife that never again, *never* would I hear her voice in the doorway, "Up, Zillah, it's time to get up."

I cried then, clinging to poor Mr. Coomb's frail arm, cried as I had never cried before, releasing all the pent-up agony of my heart, cried bitterly, tears of regret, of words left unsaid, deeds left undone, for the passing of my childhood, for my hopeless love of Richard, for Grandmama, a whole host of sad things which I had carried like a burden these past few days.

Mr. Coombs had spoken the truth when he said that my grandmother's will would surprise me. I was not only surprised, but astonished and greatly puzzled too. My grandmother had been a well-to-do woman.

"I don't understand," I said to Mr. Coombs.

"She received a settlement from your grandfather plus an annuity of a thousand pounds a year and its all been left to you in trust under my guardianship until you marry."

"So much. . . !"

He nodded. "If and when you should marry, the trust, as it is set up, will be yours to do with

as you wish. You will have sole authority. In other words it does not automatically go to your husband as is sometimes the case. In the meanwhile you can live quite comfortably on the income."

"But I still don't understand," I said. "If Grandmama had all that money why did she, why did *we* live as we did on the moor?"

"Because she loved a simple life. I told you she was an extraordinary person, a woman without pretense, independent, self reliant. The moor was the only place she found where she could be herself."

"Yes," I said. "Yes, I think I can understand that."

We sat for a few minutes each immersed in our own thoughts.

"And what will you do, Zillah?" asked Mr. Coombs, breaking the long silence.

"I don't know," I said.

"You will always be welcome here."

"In Byrnne? When they dislike Grandmama and me so?"

He sighed. "I have told you that is not true. The few superstitious people that are living hereabouts are dying off. New blood is coming in. Why in six months time we shall have the railway running through. And there's talk of putting in a granary."

I looked at him and said nothing.

"But perhaps," he went on, "now that you have the wherewithal you might want to lease a fine home in London."

"London? I'm afraid I don't care for the idea

of London or for a fine home." I waved my hand at the papers on Mrs. Coomb's desk. "I . . . I would give it all to have Grandmama back." Fresh tears welled in my eyes.

"But you can't," said Mr. Coombs. "Be sensible, Zillah. You are young, you have your whole life ahead of you. Someday you will marry and. . ."

"Marry!" I thought of Richard and the sudden bitterness welling up from my throat was like the taste of hard, green apples. "I shall never marry."

"You say that now, my dear." He sighed.

There was a small silence as my thoughts milled about. "Perhaps I shall rebuild the cottage and live as Grandmama did."

"She would not be happy to hear that," said Mr. Coombs kindly. "She wanted you to be a lady, to have a husband."

"But *she* was content enough living alone."

"She was different. . ."

I opened my mouth to speak and he held up his hand. "We often talked about your future, she and I. She said that you would never be happy living out your life on the moor."

"But how could she. . . ?" I recalled then the day I had come back from Moorsend, excited because of Richard, because I had found Malcolm, a cousin, even if only by marriage, and how glowingly I had described the furnishings at Moorsend. And Grandmama had assumed that I hankered for fashionable society, for elegant things, when all I wanted was to belong, to be part of a family, to be loved.

"It is too soon to make up your mind," Mr. Coombs broke into my thoughts. "For now I suggest you return to the Seminar and finish out the month remaining. Perhaps by then you will have some notion of what you want to do."

So I went back to Miss Young's as Mr. Coombs advised. Mrs. Brunswick, duty bound to reprimand me for having left the premises without permission, did so, but mildly, since, as she said, I had suffered a terrible loss.

I detected an odd look in her eyes as she spoke to me—puzzlement? awe? I could not tell—but later when I saw the same look in the eyes of some of my classmates I asked Augusta.

"They are all wondering how it was you knew of your grandmother's death before the telegram arrived," Augusta explained.

"And what did you tell them?" I asked.

"That you just *knew*."

I was not surprised then, when two of the girls, Janet and Luella, came to me the next day before bedtime and asked, please, would I read their fortunes? I refused, but this did not prevent the other girls from badgering me, and finally I gave in. "I'll read only one," I said. "So pick straws and decide which of you it will be."

The short straw fell to Augusta and I made up some romantic fol-de-rol about traveling to a foreign country and meeting a French count and marrying him.

In the meanwhile I had written the news of my grandmother's death to Malcolm, and he, dear soul, made the long trip from Cambridge, arriving one Saturday to extend his condolences

in person.

He had grown thinner since I had last seen him—and older. But perhaps he only seemed older because I felt so much older myself.

“You can always come and stay with Uncle and Aunt in Paris,” he said, talking past Miss Young’s bobbing head as we sat in the front parlor.

“Thank you, but I think not, Malcolm. I don’t care for city living.” Though that was strictly true there was another reason for my refusal. I remembered Grandmama’s curt and not too flattering description of Aunt Faith and I did not think she would appeal to me either.

“If you change your mind you have only to let me know,” he said. “You will write and tell me your plans?” He rose and came over and took my hand.

“Of course, I will. You and the Coombs are the only old friends I have left now.”

He gave me a smile, squeezed my hand and left.

It was the last day but one before the term ended and I was packing my things, still unsure of where I would go, debating whether to return to Byrnne or to accept Augusta’s invitation to join she and her family on a tour of the Continent when the downstairs maid poked her head in the door. “Miss Ashland, you have a visitor. A young gentleman,” she announced.

Thinking it was Malcolm again I did not pause to tidy my hair or remove my school pinafore but went directly down the stairs. I heard voices on the other side of the parlor door, Miss

Young's and a male voice. Not Malcolm's.

I listened more closely and my breath caught as the blood rushed to my face. Richard! My first impulse was to turn and flee. But his voice, his presence so close drew me.

Smoothing my skirt, I swallowed and opened the door. He was sitting next to Miss Young with his back to me. I took a step forward and he swung round, then got abruptly to his feet. I stood very tall, very straight, rather primly, the way Mrs. Brunswick had taught proper young ladies to stand, and extending my hand, said, "How do you do, Captain Cates? How nice of you to call," in a voice which struck my own ears as affected, if not pompous.

To my astonishment his cheeks beneath their tan flushed as he took my hand. But he shook it vigorously, his one good eye, still savage, boring through me. "I came because. . ." He threw a glance over his shoulder at Miss Young whose mouth quivered in a grimace as her head bobbed in approval. ". . . because I have something to say."

"Yes. . . ?" What could it possibly be? I thought.

"Come outside for a walk. I must speak to you alone."

"I can't," I said. Were we to go through the same routine again? "You know the rules."

"It has already been arranged." He turned to Miss Young who had never left off bobbing her head. "You see?" he said, giving me his arm and escorting me from the parlor.

"What is it?" I asked as he closed the door

behind.

"No—*outside*."

"I'll get my shawl."

"You won't need it, the day is warm."

We went out the front door and down the steps and through the iron gate in silence, my curiosity growing. From the corner of my eye I saw his profile set in stern and sober lines. Thinking that some latent feeling of social obligation had brought him to offer sympathy, I said, "You heard then that my grandmother died?"

"Why, no," he said, pausing, a look of genuine astonishment on his face. "I had not heard. I am terribly sorry. I . . . I have not been in touch with the Cowles. When did this happen?"

I told him.

"I am truly sorry," he repeated.

We had reached the corner and now we turned it and commenced walking along an elm lined street. A horse and cart rumbled by. Neither of us spoke, both of us staring at the back of the cartman as he slowly disappeared from view down the arched canopy of thick, green leaves.

Finally I broke the silence. "What was it you wanted to talk to me about, Captain Cates?"

He turned to me. "Richard, please call me Richard." For a moment his eye blazed, then in a subdued voice. "First off, I want to apologize for my abominable behaviour. . ."

"I thought that I. . ."

"No," he interrupted bluntly. "I was at fault. Dreadfully at fault. I admit to you, I confess

with a great deal of shame . . . I . . . I made that assignation in the garden for the sole purpose of seducing you."

I could not pretend to be shocked. For the truth of the matter was I doubt I would have been much grieved, then, if he *had* seduced me. But I felt I ought to say something. "What made you change your mind?"

An old man on the arm of a large bosomed woman came strolling toward us and Richard pulled me aside to let them pass.

"That night. . . ," he began, ". . . that night when I saw your face . . . those large eyes with the moonlight shining in them . . . and the way you said, 'I love you,' I thought. . ." He swallowed and then went on in a rough harsh voice. "Look here, Zillah, I'm not good at making speeches. I have been away trying to think things through. I've tried writing, tried . . . oh, hang it all! Will you marry me?"

All the social gloss I had acquired so painfully at Miss Young's, especially the part of how a young refined virginal lady receives a proposal, fell away and my mouth dropped open.

"I love you," he said softly, almost shyly, touching my hand tentatively as if he were afraid I would snatch it away. "And I was hoping you meant it when you said . . . when you said. . ."

"Oh," I said, my voice coming up from the depths. "Oh, Richard! I did! I did!"

And he pulled me into his arms and kissed me and I kissed him back and we laughed and

kissed again and would have gone on in that delirious, happy way, if a voice, dripping with scorn had not said, "Such goings on in public. I don't know what the world is coming to."

Mr. Coombs had not thought it necessary to postpone our marriage on account of my mourning. "Your grandmother would have pooh-poohed the idea," he said. And I think, too, he was secretly pleased I had changed my mind so quickly and taken a husband, thus settling the worrisome question of my future.

We had a very quiet wedding. Augusta and her family were unable to attend, having already started on their Grand Tour. So our only guests were Mr. and Mrs. Coombs and Malcolm Culpepper who had come down from London where he was now practicing law.

Just before Richard and I left on our honeymoon Malcolm took me aside and very earnestly said, "You must not forget I am your friend. If ever you should need me. . ."

"Need you?" I leaned up and kissed his cheek. "Dear Malcolm, always kind. Thank you, anyway."

And as we rode off, Richard and I arm in arm, laughing and throwing kisses to my three friends on the doorstep, I thought, I shall never need anyone, I have Richard.

But that was before Wuthersfield, before the shadows closed in and the nightmare began.

CHAPTER IV

No one had prepared me for Wuthersfield. Augusta had never seen it. The uncle from whom Richard had received his inheritance had chosen to live in the warmer climate of Rome the last twenty years of his life during which time the house had remained uninhabited and even Augusta's parents did not seem to know much about it.

For his part, Richard gave me only the vaguest of descriptions. "Ummmm . . . it's largish," he said in answer to my query, "Lots of space to rattle about in. Old—I believe it goes back to Tudor times. Has a genuine minstrel's gallery. Not many houses have those anymore, I daresay. And . . . well, you shall see for your-

self very soon."

Meager as his account was, however, my fancy played upon it and conjured up a grand, imposing mansion at the end of a long avenue of limes, a large, red bricked house, gabled with arched mullioned windows, set in the midst of green rolling parkland.

Wuthersfield was nothing of the sort.

My first glimpse of it was through the broken stone pillars of the gate and down a rutted, overgrown, weed choked lane; a house with a scabrous roof where many of the tiles had fallen away, the chimneys blackened with centuries of soot crouching like squat, ugly toadstools. Thick, creeping, tangled ivy clung to the outer walls, hiding most of the windows and as we drew close I could see how many of the shutters were broken, some hanging by a single rusted hinge.

"It shall all be tidied up," said Richard cheerfully, apparently reading the dismay on my face.

He had acquired servants before we had gone off on our honeymoon, a fortnight in Paris, and he had also installed his cousin, Arthur Cates and Arthur's wife, Thomasin. "They are hard up for the moment," he had said. "And they will be a great help to you."

What kind of help he had not explained. But I had not given it another thought, then, when he had told me about it in Paris. I was too deliriously happy to see anything but through a rose tinted aura. Did I say happy? What a poor, feeble word to describe that joy, that wild, ec-

static, feverish, inconceivable joy. For Richard proved to be a more passionate, ardent and tender lover than I had ever dreamed. He was my teacher and my guide, too, in that wonderful city he knew so well and for ten glorious days we drifted hand in hand through its streets, living in a sort of never-never world.

But now the honeymoon was behind and reality in the shape of Wuthersfield was staring me in the face.

The door was opened by a seamy faced man with a peg leg. "Captain!" he shouted. "Yer home!" He laughed as he pumped Richard's hand. "We wuz wonderin' . . ." Here he cast a sidelong glance at me. ". . . when t'would be."

"This is my wife, the new Mrs. Cates. And, Zillah, darling, this is Sgt. Walls. He was with me in Africa."

Sgt. Walls came to stiff attention. "How-do-y'do," he said expressionlessly. Then turning back to Richard, "We wuz jest settin' down to cards and I said, 'if the Captain wuz only here,' and then, by God . . . why here y'be."

"It's good to know I've been missed," said Richard smiling, very pleased.

"The others are here, too." Sgt. Walls gestured with his cropped head. "We made a card room back o' the kitchen. Handy, y'know." He winked broadly. "Come and see."

"Yes," Richard said, stepping through the door. He turned, and seeing me still on the outer step, said, "Why . . . I almost forgot."

Laughing he scooped me up in his arms and brought me across the threshold. He whirled me

about and as he set me on my feet I had a glimpse of the sergeant stomping off across the vast hall.

It was a dreary room, that hall at Wuthersfield, cold and gray, the only light coming in pale, watery shafts through several high, lead paned windows grimed over with dirt. The dead stone fireplace was piled high with accumulated ash which had shifted in flakes on to the hearth and the floor around it. And under my feet the uncarpeted floor exuded a dampness, chilling me to the bone.

"Excuse me for a moment, darling," Richard said, "I will see if I can get someone to bring in our luggage."

He disappeared through the same door the sergeant had used earlier and I was left alone, feeling diminished in size. I stood there staring wide-eyed about me and as the seconds went by I seemed to grow strangely smaller and smaller.

I could not have remained thus for more than a minute or two when I heard footsteps on the staircase to my right, and looking up I saw a woman descending. In the half light she appeared curiously familiar, her face plucking at my memory, just as an elusive, half forgotten tune might.

"You are Zillah," she said, smiling, coming toward me. She had white streaked, slate colored hair looped in a coronet above a thin, heart shaped face. She wore a gray gown, braided and looped and bustled in a fashion long out of style. "I am Thomasin, Arthur's wife."

"I am so glad to meet you," I murmured, and

we embraced. Now that I had a closer look I saw she was older than I had first thought, her forehead grooved in deep lines, the outer corner of each eye webbed with crow's feet.

"You are far prettier than Richard's letter led us to believe," she said.

"Thank you." Her eyes were a curious brown-yellow, and later I came to notice how they seemed to change shape with the degree of light, as a cat's will do.

"Arthur should be home presently," she said, smiling. That smiling was another oddity of Thomasin's I was to find. It was perennial. What she thought or how she felt behind it was hard to know. It was always there, though, like a mask, and I sometimes wondered if she slept with it too. "Richard did not let us know when to expect you."

"We were not very sure ourselves," I answered, clasping my gloved hands to repress a shudder against the chill air which was fast numbing my limbs.

"Oh . . . please, please forgive me," Thomasin said in an ingratiating tone of voice. "I have been ever so thoughtless. You are cold. Come into the library where there's a nice fire."

The fire Thomasin spoke of had died to a sickly blue blaze and the high ceilinged room, if it had ever been warm, was now cooled to almost the same temperature as the hall. It was a large room, layered with dust, smelling of damp and rot, the windows overshadowed by two thick branched, dark firs outside.

"We've had such a time," Thomasin said.

"Not being able to get any decent help. I set the scullery maid to cleaning this room . . . oh, it must have been at least three days ago. But she doesn't seem to have made much progress."

Looking about me at the soot blackened mantel, the cobwebs shimmering in dark corners it seemed as though she had hardly begun. "Is the scullery maid the only one who does the cleaning?" I asked.

"She is the only one who will consent to doing it," she said. "The others feel it beneath them."

I raised my brows and before I could speak a man walked in, a tall man, broad shouldered with a shock of pepper and salt hair. He was dressed in brown breeches, an old sheepskin jacket and thick boots to which the mud still clung.

"Arthur," said Tomasin, "Richard has come home and this lovely creature is his bride."

He grinned, revealing a mouthful of protruding teeth. "How do you do?" he said, propping his gun in a corner and throwing his game bag on the floor. He dropped his hat on a chair and came over to where I sat his hand outstretched. "So our guest has arrived."

Guest! I thought, stung to annoyance.

I slowly rose to my feet. "My name is Zillah," I said, infusing my voice with icy dignity. "Mrs. Richard Cates, now." I smiled. "I am so glad to be at home."

Arthur glanced past my shoulder at his wife. "Ah, yes. Oh dear, I suppose I've said the wrong

thing. I didn't realize . . . you are rather young, you see. . ."

"I shall be eighteen in a few months," I said.

"Oh, yes, yes. . ." Then to cover his embarrassment, "Where is Richard?"

"He went to see about our luggage," I answered, also wondering where he had gone. It seemed the house had swallowed him up.

I sat down again beside Thomasin. Arthur took a chair across from me. "Have you been hunting?" I asked him politely.

"Yes," he answered. Then grinning, "No luck though. The game is poor around here."

There followed an awkward silence during which Thomasin smiled into space and Arthur sprawled in his chair, occasionally throwing me a furtive glance. Finally, I said, "I wonder if I could see our rooms?"

"Oh . . . of course, forgive me." Thomasin was instantly on her feet. "Rosie was fixing it for you. I'll run up and see if she has finished."

"I might as well go along with you, if you don't mind," I said.

"Not at all. Please do."

I followed Thomasin from the library and up the broad staircase. We went down a passage and stopped before a door. "I will leave you now," Thomasin said. "I should see about lunch."

I opened the door and came into a high ceiled, chilly bedroom. The first thing I noticed was the bed, a large canopied one, unmade, bared to the mattress, cobwebs looped from post to post. Dismayed I looked around and it

was then I saw a small, thin girl who appeared to be no more than eleven crouched on the hearth, trying to lift a log on to the grate. Her face was turned away but I saw her shoulders shudder with effort.

"Here. . . , " I said, going over to her, "let me help."

She dropped the log and turned, her features flushed with exertion. "S'all right m'um. You needn't trouble yerself." She had the hungry emaciated look, the pallid skin stretched taut over prominent cheekbones I had often seen in the children of the poorer classes in our village.

"You're Rosie," I said. "And I don't mind at all."

I knelt down and together we lifted the log, setting it atop the kindling. Rosie put a match to it and the flames, after a few moments, blazed up. I stood in front of the fire, warming my hands, while Rosie began to sweep around me.

There was dust and grime and cobwebs everywhere just as there was in the library below, and I wondered how one small girl was expected to make any headway against the accumulated neglect of years.

"There is no one to help you?" I asked, much the same query I had made of Thomasin.

"No, m'um."

I watched her for another few minutes, then, "Rosie," I said, "if you could get me another broom, some hot water and a scrub brush, I think the two of us could make this room cozy and bright in no time."

She gaped at me as if I had suddenly gone daft. "But . . . but y'be the mistress. . ."

"All the more reason for wanting a clean house," I said, giving her a reassuring smile. "Run along, now."

By the time she returned I had already rolled up my sleeves and was at the open window vigorously beating at the mattress which I had managed to drag from the bed and hang over the sill. We worked side by side, sweeping and polishing and dusting, and Rosie, encouraged by me, told me a little about herself. She was the third of nine children. Her father, Sam Pike, leased a small holding in the neighborhood from which he eked out a precarious existence, so precarious that as soon as Rosie reached the age of thirteen (not eleven as I had thought) she was put out to service. Thomasin had hired her.

"What are the other servants like?" I asked her.

"A queer bunch," she said, shaking her head, "If you don't mind my saying so."

Within an hour and a half the room had been transformed, the bed made up with fresh linen and a sprigged muslin spread I had found in the cupboard, the bureau and tables shining with beeswax, the lamps cleaned (amenities, such as gaslight had not yet come to Wuthersfield). "Well, that's much better," I said, surveying our work with satisfaction.

After Rosie, laden with brooms and pails, had left I suddenly remembered Richard. Where on earth could he have gone to? Perhaps he had

some business to attend to on the grounds or in the stables. Still, I thought, he might have told me. And our luggage had not been brought up, either. I had so wanted to change after our long journey, in fact, needed to, as my blouse and skirt had become even more soiled and wrinkled in the process of house cleaning. I was hungry too. Thomasin had said she would see to lunch, but though it was half past two, no one had announced it.

I tidied myself the best I could and let myself out the door and went down the stairs. Across the hall I saw a small gallery, the famous minstrel's gallery, no doubt, and I wondered how long it had been since musicians fiddled away there, entertaining the people below. A century, at least, from the dead, dusty look of it.

At the bottom of the staircase I paused. The silence seemed to echo from wall to wall, like the silence under the vaulted dome of the great cathedral, and again I had the sensation that I was diminishing in size, that I was growing smaller, reduced in dimension to a speck in a vast, cold universe.

I shook the feeling from me and hesitating a moment longer, suddenly, from the tail of my eye, perceived the swift, furtive movement of a dark, scuttling shape. I turned my head; there was nothing but the aqueous trembling sunlight on the stone floor, the emptiness and the echoing quiet. Suppressing a shudder, my feet tapping in the hollow emptiness, I crossed the hall to the door where I had seen Richard disappear.

On the other side was a large kitchen, empty except for Rosie peeling potatoes at the table. No cook, no servants, no Thomasin. I was beginning to wonder if I, together with Rosie, had been completely abandoned, when I heard a burst of male laughter coming from a partially opened door at the far end of the room. I went over to the door and swinging it wide saw a group of men in shirt sleeves playing cards at a table cluttered with wine bottles and beer mugs. Richard was seated at the head of the table, a cigar stuck between his teeth. He looked up in surprise.

"Zillah. . . !"

The other men, their faces heated with drink, turned as one and stared at me. A huge mastiff under the table began to growl, then abruptly changed to a yipping whimper as though a rough boot had caught him in the side.

"Zillah. . . !" Richard sprang to his feet, shoving back his chair so precipitately it clattered to the floor. "Zillah . . . I clean forgot."

He hurried to me and threw his arm around my shoulders. "Men. . . ," he announced solemnly, ". . . soldiers, I want you all to meet my lovely bride. Stand up, you numbskulls, when you're introduced to a lady!"

Chairs scraped as they lumbered to their feet. "Arthur and Sgt. Walls you have already met, I believe," Arthur grinned and the sergeant threw me an enigmatic look, moving his lips soundlessly.

"Colby, Wimpole and Travis," Richard went on. The men, who in that blurred first impres-

sion all looked alike to me, seamed, weather-beaten faces, ducked their heads and stuttered acknowledgement. They seemed civil enough, yet I thought I caught an undercurrent, a subtle air of resentment.

"I have disturbed your card game," I said, infusing my words with an affability I did not feel. "Please . . . please be seated."

"It's all right, s'all right," Richard said, slurring his words. "Game s'over, anyway. Have you been finding your way round, m'dear?"

"I . . . yes, I thought. . . ." I wanted to ask him why he had left me standing in the hall, a stranger and alone, and gone off to play cards, but the men's eyes were fixed on me expectantly as if waiting for the scolding they knew ought to come. I had no intention of satisfying them. "I was looking for the cook," I said.

"The cook? You've come to the right place then. Colby!"

A man with an ugly, puckered scar running up one side of his face threw back his shoulders and barked, "Yes, sir!"

"The cook. Now. . . ." Richard turned to me. "Why did you want the cook, m'dear?"

"To get lunch," I said. "It's long past the hour."

"So 'tis, so 'tis. I *am* a bit empty." He patted his stomach. "Colby, you are to get lunch."

I looked at Colby who stood there swaying to and fro, blinking red rimmed eyes. Was Richard joking?

"Richard . . . I . . . perhaps you did not understand." I had seen Richard take wine be-

fore, but I had never known him to be the slightest bit tipsy. That he could be so and on our first day at Wuthersfield pained me. "I meant the cook."

"He is the cook, Zillah. He cooks splendidly. Cooked with us in Africa, in India . . . didn't you Colby?"

"Most certainly, Captain."

"And the others?" I asked, a terrible thought taking hold.

"Yes . . . the others. All fine fellows. Walls, our butler, Colby, the cook. Yes, I've already said that, haven't I? Now let's see. Wimpole is in charge of the stables, Travis waits on table, among other things. Arthur, here. . ." Arthur grinned. "What are you, Arthur?"

Someone snickered and Richard's eye blazed. "It's no laughing matter. I won't have any disrespect here. Arthur . . . Arthur is keeper of the keys."

So these were the servants Richard had hired, the servants who found it beneath them to scrub, to dust and to sweep. And from the looks of things, they seemed to do very little else but drink and play cards and keep Richard company. They were men who had apparently served under Richard at one time or another and he had brought them together at Wuthersfield. Looking at the motley crew, a little unsteady on their feet, all flushed with wine, my annoyance quickened to anger and I had the sudden impulse to give them all the sack.

Was I not mistress of Wuthersfield? And as such was not the running of the household en-

tirely in my hands? That was what Mrs. Brunswick had taught us as future wives. But then, as I had already discovered, Mrs. Brunswick had taught us a number of things which were at odds with reality.

"Zillah," Richard said, tightening his grip on my shoulder and guiding me through the door, "why don't you make yourself comfortable in the library while Colby gathers a meal for us?"

"I . . . yes. But Richard, the luggage. I wanted to change."

"Oh, yes, the luggage. Well. . . ." A quick backward glance at the room we had just left. "Certainly, but . . . just one more hand, Zillah, and I will tend to it myself." He kissed me lightly on the mouth. "You really don't mind, do you?"

"No," I lied. "No, I don't mind."

He kissed me again. "I love you," he said, and went happily back to his card game.

Well, I thought with an inward sigh, I married him for better or worse, didn't I? And if I had really wanted an ordered, "tidy" life would I have chosen such a husband? Dashing, romantic men like Richard were simply not practical, and I could not expect him to understand that a wife might resent her husband's old cronies installed in her kitchen under the guise of servants. Time, I thought, time and patience and I could gradually bring him round to see my point of view.

But then I saw Rosie at the stove stirring something in a pot and the sight of her so small and bird-like with literally the entire work load

on her frail shoulders brought back my annoyance. "Leave that," I said rather sharply. "Mr. Colby will get lunch."

"But . . . m'um . . . he told me. . ."

"I don't care what he told you. You have enough to do."

"Yes, m'um. And please, m'um, what is it I am to do?"

"Oh, find some silver to polish," I snapped, not thinking of her but the situation in general where strong men sat about playing a game, while Rosie, who looked as if she had never eaten a decent meal in her life, must slave.

Rosie's eyes suddenly brimmed with tears, and I realized she had no way of knowing what was going on inside my head. "I am sorry, Rosie," I said more gently. "It's not your fault. Perhaps you ought to take a rest. Yes, why don't you go to your room and rest for a while?"

More confused than ever she gazed at me. I doubt Rosie had ever been asked to take a rest in the middle of the day since she was a toddler. A tear rode down her cheek, then another. I had the sudden terrible desire to start crying right along with her. I wasn't all that much older than she, and the part of me that was still very youthful felt lonely and bewildered too.

But I couldn't give in to weeping, not now, not on my first day in my new home. "Never mind, Rosie," I said. "You go ahead with what you were doing." I left her then, afraid if I remained longer I might befuddle the girl even more.

Once the door was closed and I came into the hall thoughts of Rosie were shoved to the back of my mind. There was something about that vaulted, echoing room I did not like. Perhaps it was the chill and lack of light. I made a mental note to ask Richard if he could get one of the men to keep a fire burning in the huge fireplace. That at least would take the edge off the gloom.

I started across the stone floor to the library and as I reached midway I had the sensation that someone had suddenly opened a door. An ice cold draft blew across the back of my neck, raising the hairs on end. I looked around, but there were no open doors. The invisible current of air might have come from the fireplace, though it did not smell of ash or chimneys but more like the pungent odor of wind blowing over freshly dug earth. The same as an open grave, I thought, and shuddered.

I heard a rustling sound, like the crumpling of paper. It seemed to come from one of the deep shadowed corners, and then all was silence again.

I listened for a moment longer. Nothing. I shrugged and then—I never knew why—I looked up.

The blood congealed in my veins.

There, looped over the rail of the minstrel's gallery, was a rope dangling downward, a rope with a hangman's noose at the end. Slowly it swung, back and forth, back and forth, like the pendulum of a clock—slowly, evenly as if it were evil, evil and alive.

CHAPTER V

Never in my life had I been frightened of anything, anyone, not really frightened as I was then. Once long ago, I remember, I had lost myself in a sudden snowstorm and had become uneasy and anxious, and, of course, I had been frightened for Grandmama after that terrible dream, but it was nothing like the eerie, cold dread which froze my limbs and sent my pulses to hammering as I stood watching the swinging noose.

It seemed absurd to be frightened of a rope, even if it did have a noose at the end, but the feeling was strong, and grew stronger with every throb of my heart, that the rope had a special meaning and that special meaning was reserved

for me.

I don't know how long I stood there, a minute, a day, an eternity, fixed, turned to stone like the floor beneath me, but at last some semblance of life returned and I heard my voice croaking, ringing out shakily in that empty room, "Who is there? Is anybody there?"

Surely the rope had not appeared of itself? I thought I perceived the black shadow of a figure behind the gallery's rail, but it was too dark to tell.

"Who is it?" I called, and the echo came back, "Is-it-is-it-is-it?"

And then, as if in answer to my terrified question, the rope began to swing wider and wider, faster and faster. In a panic I whipped round, stumbling back across the hall to the kitchen.

Dimly aware of Rosie staring at me I hurried past her and blundered into the card room. Richard, startled, looked up from his cards. "What is it?" he asked. "Your face is as white as a sheet."

"C . . . come into the hall, Richard. I . . . I want to show you something."

If he had been the least bit reluctant to tear himself away I think I should have screamed. But he got up and came to me. "You're trembling," he said, putting his arm about my waist.

"Please . . . Richard . . . the hall. . . ."

He led me through the kitchen and out into the hall. "What is it?" he repeated.

I looked up at the minstrel's gallery and there

was *nothing*. Nothing but the railing and the shadows behind it. No rope, no noose—*nothing*.

"I . . . I saw a rope. . ." I pointed. "Richard . . . it was a hangman's rope . . . a . . ." I felt hysteria rising in my throat.

He pressed his finger to my lips. "Shh, my darling, I see no rope."

"But Richard . . . *it was there!*"

"You are tired, darling, and hungry. But if you think there is something up there we shall go and have a look."

Still with his arm about my waist he guided me up the narrow, winding, stone stairs to the gallery. Here, in this dark, shadowed place where fiddlers once scraped joyfully, the silence hung heavy, weighted with centuries of dust. On the walls the dim, faded portraits cocooned with gossamer webs looked down on us, the eyes of the long dead staring in frozen surprise.

"Well, Zillah, darling," Richard said, squeezing me, "are you satisfied now?"

I was far from satisfied. I *had* seen a rope and it had filled me with nameless dread. But what could I say in the face of the evidence, for it appeared that no one had put foot in the gallery for eons.

As we turned to go I noticed a door at the far end. "Where does that lead to?" I asked.

"I don't know," Richard said. "But we can find out."

The door was locked and Richard left me standing there while he went down to search for keys. Oddly enough I did not feel frightened at

being left alone. My fear seemed to have vanished. It was as though whatever had scared me, whether human or spirit, had gone. I examined the rail, running my eye along it, to see if there was any sign that a rope had been flung across it, but there was none.

My gaze slid over the rail and down below, standing in a patch of sunlight, was Thomasin, looking up at me.

"Zillah!" she called. "I heard you had a fright."

Her face was at an angle, catching the moted sunbeams, and I suddenly realized why she seemed familiar to me. In the harsh light, the severe styling of her hair brought into clear relief her elongated ears, the sharp nose, the pointed chin, the uptilted eyes, and I was vividly reminded of a fox. The resemblance was uncanny.

It was a momentary illusion, though, for the next instant she moved and the remarkable likeness disappeared. "Arthur told me," she said. "Is there anything I can do?"

"No, thank you. I . . . it was nothing," I added rather lamely, as by now my fright put in perspective seemed excessive and I was beginning to feel a little ashamed. I imagined Richard had told Arthur of my experience, had told everyone. The men were probably talking about it over their cards, laughing, shrugging their shoulders, one saying to the other, "Well, that's a woman for you. Scared of her own shadow." It was a humiliating thought.

"I'll be down presently," I said to Thomasin.

"If you need me, I am in the library," she said.

A few minutes later Richard returned and unlocked the door. We went through into a dim, musty passage banked by doors. I opened each of them in turn, not really knowing why or what I expected to find. There wasn't anything, really, except a series of smallish bedrooms, cloaked in semi-darkness where the chinked, shuttered light played over the ghostly outline of furniture swathed in white dust sheets.

At the end of the passage was a staircase and descending it we found ourselves in the back passage which led to the kitchen and card room. "Well. . . ?" asked Richard. "Are you content?"

"Richard. . . , " I began, biting my lip. "Did anyone excuse himself from the game after I left the kitchen?"

He stared at me for a long moment. "Are you thinking one of the men . . . my men. . . ? Why that's preposterous."

"The rope was *there*, Richard. And it was meant to frighten me, I am sure of that."

"But why should the men want to frighten you?" he asked incredulously.

I thought a moment, remembering their sullen faces, their muttered acknowledgements when I had interrupted their card game and Richard had introduced us. "I . . . I sensed . . . I thought they seemed to resent me."

"Resent you? Of course they don't, my darling. It's all in your imagination. They are a

rough bunch, I'll admit, all bachelors, comfortable only in the barracks. And, I suppose, they . . . well, they are rather heavy footed in the company of a lady. But they are all splendid fellows, loyal, dependable. I am sure once you get to know them and they you, you will get along beautifully."

In my thoughts I tried to be fair, I tried to see the logic of Richard's reasoning, but it was no use. I already guessed that his comrades-in-arms would never grow to like me nor I them.

And as time went on my supposition proved more and more true. The plain fact was that we were rivals of a sort, the men and I, not equal rivals to be sure, since they were not women. How much simpler it would have been if that were so. A woman I could meet on common ground, I could fight. If Richard had brought a woman into the house, an old love, a past mistress, I would be within my rights to object, to storm, to rant, even, if I wished, or railing that I felt certain I could win him away from her no matter how beautiful or how seductive she was. Hadn't I triumphed over the traps and wiles of dozens of beauties who had once tried to snare him as a husband?

But these soldiers of fortune who had served under my "Captain," these men who had shared a whole life of adventure, of danger with Richard formed a bond, a closed circle of friendship with him from which I was coldly excluded. And I could do nothing (how could I be jealous of a man's friendships?), but accept the situation and make the best of it.

I'll never know what they thought of me. Sometimes Colby would throw down his cards and go into the kitchen, but most often he ignored me.

Perhaps a few words from me to Richard might have sent the men to their jobs, but I had not the courage to force the issue, for in the back of my mind was the lurking thought that he might side with his cronies leaving me entirely outside the pale.

So we went on in haphazard fashion as the days slipped one into another. The card games, the gambling, the drinking continued, Richard spending more and more time in the room back of the kitchen. The first week or so he had given me a fair portion of his attention, taking me into Lyleton, the local village, riding with me in the mornings over the countryside, walking the grounds with me, talking about future plans. But gradually these excursions became fewer until now I hardly saw him except at meals, or if I should waken when he came stumbling into bed late at night. Some nights he did not come to bed at all. To me this absence from our bedroom was the hardest of all to bear.

Yet never did I utter a word of complaint. What was left of my battered pride forbade it. Though Thomasin must have guessed I was not the happiest of newly marrieds and sympathized openly and at some length about the sorry state of affairs, saying that the men were taking advantage of me, I did not encourage such talk and she soon ceased to speak of it.

I did not know exactly what to make of Thomasin. Because it rained unseasonably and al-

most incessantly the first two weeks of August I was unable to go out riding as was my custom, and so, by necessity, I was much in her company. Under these circumstances I should have become fairly intimate with her, but she remained somewhat of a puzzle. There was that smile, always there, of course, and like her husband she seemed anxious to please. And yet her laugh, her voice did not quite ring true. If I had remained upon the moor with Grandmama, alone, isolated from society, in my innocence I might have taken Thomasin at face value. But my two years at the Seminar had taught me more than how to crochet antimacassars or figure sums: I had learned about people. And in my mind, to put it baldly, Thomasin Cates was a hypocrite.

Perhaps a life of genteel poverty, having to pretend she was not poor, having to be nice to people she did not especially like, had made her so. But even after she had told me a good part of her sad history I found it hard to warm to her.

She had been a childless widow, so she told me, no longer young when she met and married Arthur. From the way she spoke of her marriage I gathered she had snatched him up as a sort of hedge against the threat of a lonely old age, rather than from any romantic notion of love.

Arthur, she said, had tried his hand at a number of things, none of which had been a success. He had served a time in the Army, had been a wine merchant, a gameskeeper, a clerk, and finally had given up all pretense of earning

his way, let alone supporting a wife, and had settled down to live on the small annuity Thomasin had inherited. Since then they had lived first with one relative, then another. "Really," Thomasin had said when she told me this, "it makes for a far more interesting life. One never has the chance to get stuffy or sunk in a boring rut. I like the change."

But I didn't believe her.

They were an oddly matched couple. Arthur was not the least good to look at, big and brawny and far from bright, whereas Thomasin, despite the lines in her face must have once been pretty; and she was clever. This disparity, however, did not seem to prevent them from having what I thought was an amiable relationship. Thomasin ruled the roost, made all the decisions whether large or small, and Arthur appeared quite happy with the arrangement.

Arthur, I noticed, rarely played cards (being short of funds might have had something to do with it). He generally hovered over the card table, drinking with the men or talking. He spent most of his time, however, tramping the fields and woods in all weathers with his gun and the mastiff (which one day ran off and never returned), hunting small game. He would shoot anything that moved, he once told me and much of what he brought home in his game bag, not being fit for the cook pot, was thrown into the trash. It grieved me to think that he would kill so wantonly, but I never spoke of it.

The one bright spot during those days was

the receipt of two letters. The first was a short friendly note from Mr. Coombs saying that my allowance would continue as before and if I wished I could draw upon my capital now that I was married. The second letter, from Augusta was more lengthy. She had met a count, a *real* count (Augusta was given to underlining every other word) and he lived in the most *magnificent* house, and she thought, no, she *knew* he was going to speak to Papa, the object-*matrimony*. I had to smile, her letter sounded so much like her. I should write to her, I thought, and wish her well. And I even composed the first half of a page, but the words, on rereading, sounded so stilted and forced I gave it up.

From Malcolm I received not a word, although he had promised to write. Perhaps he was too busy, too caught up with his affairs and could not find the time. Perhaps he was waiting to hear from me first. I thought of asking Mr. Coombs if he knew Malcolm's address, but somehow never got around to it.

In mid-August the rain let up for three whole days, and I thought that at last we should have our fine summer weather, but by twilight of the third day the black clouds began to gather again over the horizon, intermingling with the scarlet gold of the dying sun. Thomasin and I were sitting in the library when the storm broke with the crackle of lightning and the boom of thunder. She was knitting and I, with a book on my lap, was listening to the wind shriek down

the chimney and the rain thrash against the windows.

We were alone. Arthur, for once, joined Richard in the card room after dinner. "This weather gives me goose pimples," Thomasin said.

"Shall I put another log on the fire?" I asked, half rising.

"It's not the *cold*," she said. "Though Lord knows it's cold enough. It's this house."

It was the first time I had heard her make any criticism of Wuthersfield and I looked at her in surprise.

"Arthur would tell me his ghost story this afternoon," she said, "though he knows I hate such foolish tales."

"What story?" I asked. "Is there a ghost at Wuthersfield?"

"My dear, what old house does not have at least one? The ghosts come with the outmoded water closets and the kerosene lamps." She stooped and brought out a new ball of yarn from her knitting bag. "You must admit Wuthersfield lends itself readily to such tales."

"Yes," I said, suddenly remembering my experience with the cold draft in the hall and the swinging noose. "What was the story?"

She tied the new yarn on to the old and resumed her knitting. "Well," she said, "it seems that the Cates family once had a witch. Her name was Gwendolyn and she was accused of the usual things, casting spells, consorting with the devil, possessing an evil eye, that sort of nonsense popularly attributed to witches during

the hunt of the mid-1600s. Gwendolyn was tried, apparently confessed and was condemned to die. But she came from an aristocratic family and they managed to persuade the judges to relent and have her hung instead of forcing her to be burned at the stake."

"How awful," I said.

"Yes," Thomasin agreed. "But Gwendolyn outwitted them. She committed suicide, thus cheating the hangman. It is his ghost, appropriately named The Hangman who is supposed to come back to Wuthersfield from time to time seeking his victim."

My mouth had gone dry, and I seemed to have lost my voice. In the silence the fire sputtered on the grate, while outside the firs, lashed by the wind, clacked at the shuttered windows.

"Do you . . . do you. . . ," I began, wetting my lips, ". . . do you believe there is a ghost at Wuthersfield?"

"Of course not," she said. "But such stories do give one the shivers on a night like this."

"Yes." A fresh burst of rain spattered the windows. "I saw the noose, Thomasin. The night I was so frightened. I saw the noose. But it was *real*. A real rope. I could swear to it."

"Perhaps you only imagined it."

"No, I don't think so."

She grimaced. "Let's not speak of it anymore. I am sorry I repeated that silly story. Why don't we talk about . . . let's see . . . what book are you reading there?"

"Dickens. The *Pickwick Papers*."

"Good. If you will, read it aloud to me?"

I read until the cabinet clock struck ten and Thomasin got to her feet. "I am tired tonight, Zillah. I think I'll go up to bed. Thank you for reading so beautifully."

She came over and kissed my cheek, a cold, dry brush of smiling lips. "Good night," I said. "Pleasant dreams."

Alone I gazed at the dying fire while outside the wind seemed to mount in fury. It howled and wailed and tore in great gusts round the corners of the house like a horde of angry devils. The flames were receding, growing smaller as they flicked across the red-embered log. I shut my book, thought of throwing some wood on the fire, but decided instead to go up to bed. Reaching for the small lamp I generally used to take me upstairs I noticed the flame was weak and would soon die unless the lamp was replenished with fuel.

Kerosene for the lamps was stored in the kitchen pantry, and I made my way there now, crossing the great hall in semi-darkness. Apparently the lights usually kept burning on the chest beneath the stairs were low on fuel too, reminding me again of the lackadasical house-keeping at Wuthersfield. Then, to add to my disgust when I reached the pantry I discovered the kerosene barrel was empty. Sgt. Walls who brought in most of our supplies had forgotten to buy any, though I remembered specifically putting kerosene on the list.

For a moment I stood there in angry contemplation, thinking I ought to go in and upbraid Walls. The door was partially open and I had a

view of the sergeant and Arthur, brows drawn together, silently studying their cards. Damn their cards! I thought. But I knew I would be wasting my breath to say anything, especially now.

Sighing heavily I got a candle from the cupboard, set it in a holder, and lit it. Then shutting the kitchen door behind I came out into the hall again only to find that the lamps there had already gone out. The darkness was total, a black inkiness without a glimmer of light.

Here the sound of the wind was low pitched, skulking and moaning at the windows and door like an animal begging to be let in. And my candle which had appeared large and sturdy enough in the kitchen seemed pitifully inadequate in the Stygian darkness, casting a weak glow ahead of me.

Looking neither to the left or right, I began to hurry across to the staircase. I was still some way from it when a draft, that sudden, horrible, swooping rush of cold air I had felt before, swirled down upon me, bending the flame of my candle and nearly extinguishing it.

I paused, drawing my shawl tighter, and cupped my free hand about the candle to shield the flame. Suddenly the wind outside ceased its complaint and the hall became strangely, weirdly silent, silent except for one whispering sound—a soft thump. Instinctively I knew what it was.

I am not going to look, I told myself.

And promptly, lifting my candle, I did.

The noose, a dim coil of rope was swinging

from the gallery rail. As I gazed at it in terror, it slowly began to descend in little jerks and diabolical twists, as if it were fishing, *searching* for someone.

I shrank back, frightened, cold with fear. But still—and I wonder at it even now—my wits did not desert me completely. The part of my mind which was not quivering and shaking, thought—should I run back and fetch Richard? But the last time I had done so the rope had disappeared in the meanwhile.

Mesmerized I watched the rope do its airy, fiendish dance. A ghost? The Hangman? Thomasin said she herself did not believe in the story, in ghosts, and I remembered, too, how I had insisted the rope was *real*. And it was, it was. There was nothing phantom-like, nothing magical about it.

Shielding the candle carefully I walked slowly across the hall to the gallery staircase. Frightened, yet determined to find out what lay behind this insane display, I started to climb the stairs. Up and up I went, not allowing myself the comfort of doubt or second thoughts. The wind gave a new howl of outrage, then seemed to draw in its breath for another onslaught, and in the brief lull I heard another sound which send my pulses leaping anew; a soft, sinister snicker.

Both hands went round the candle in a convulsive grasp and my shawl slid from my shoulders. I did not stoop to pick it up, but gritting my teeth, forced myself to continue.

Did ghosts snicker? I had thought they went

floating, fluttering, or flitting about in total silence.

And yet—I asked myself, as I placed one foot before the other—supposing it *was* a spirit from another world, the world of the dead. Suppose it was The Hangman?

I got to the top and with one hand clutching the rail, raised my candle.

In the trembling light I saw a tall figure wrapped from head to foot in a gray shroud. And as I stared with bulging eyes, a bony claw came up. One horrible, fleshless finger pointed at me, at *me*!

The candle went out and a scream froze in my throat as I felt that horrible finger touch my shoulder.

I shrank back and the next moment I was tumbling head over heels down the staircase, going over and over, the hard-edged stone steps coming up, knocking my teeth, my head, my knees, my ribs, one sharp pain beating into another until black oblivion overtook me, cancelling it all.

CHAPTER VI

When my eyes fluttered open I was lying in a heap on the stone stairs. Stunned and dazed I could not comprehend why I should be there. Then gradually, as I became conscious of my throbbing head and the intense cold, memory flooded back.

I glanced quickly upward.

I could see nothing in the nebulous, hovering shadows and yet, intuitively I knew—as I had known before—the shrouded figure and the noose were gone.

I was still clutching the candle, extinguished now and of little help to me. The only illumination was a faint glimmer from the tall central window through which I could see a pale moon

breasting the flying clouds. The rain was over but how long I had been unconscious I did not know.

Grasping the rail I pulled myself to my feet, stepping on something soft and pliant. I picked it up. My shawl. I guessed then that the wollen, fringed cloth had impeded my fall and probably saved my life, for if I had fallen the full, twisting, winding length of the stairs, I could have easily broken my neck. As it was, the only injury I had apparently suffered was a bump the size of a bird's egg on the side of my head which I discovered when I brushed the tumbled hair from my eyes.

I felt my way slowly, stiffly down to the hall, crossed it and opened the kitchen door. Colby was at the ale barrel filling a pitcher. When he heard me he twisted his head and a look of amazement leaped to his eyes. It seemed to me, too, that his face, under its weatherbeaten rudeness, blanched. Then quickly turning, he shut off the ale spigot and without a word hurried from the room.

His not speaking to me in itself was hardly surprising. Colby, as well as the others in the crew, found little to say to me no matter what the occasion, but the queer look on his face, the speedy departure, I thought odd. And it set me to pursuing a thought which had occurred to me in passing after my first encounter with the rope.

Supposing what I had seen in the gallery, what had happened to me, was a grim joke contrived by one or all of the men? Not so much of

a joke, I thought, grim or otherwise, now that I had come close to killing myself. But then supposing it was not meant to be a joke?

I sat down on a chair and turned the thought over in my mind. Yes—supposing one of them, Colby or Wimpole or Walls, having heard of The Hangman, had dressed in a shroud. He—whichever it was—could have waited for me to pass, alone, across the darkness of the hall, then flung the rope over the gallery rail with a thump to catch my attention. Being a woman, a silly goose, he perhaps reasoned, I might die of sheer fright. As it was I had obliged him by climbing the staircase where a tap of a bony finger had sent me hurtling downward. If I had been killed on those stairs what a relief for all of them, an irritant removed like a burr from a stocking, no more biting reminders of fires unlit, of muddy boots in the kitchen, of meals late, of supplies running out. The house would be free of its mistress and each of them could do exactly as he pleased.

It was a cold, chilling thought, perhaps an absurd one? The astonishment on Colby's face might have been caused by the sight of my loose, disheveled hair and dust streaked gown. He didn't like me, that was true, but would he or the others dare harm their captain's wife?

On the other hand, who would know *how* I had died. Finding my corpse at the bottom of the stairs, on the stone floor of the hall might be sad, regrettable, tragic, but there would be no indication, none whatsoever, that my death had not been accidental.

I debated a minute or two, asking myself if I ought to go in and speak to Richard. What could I say? The last time I had burst in on him, white and gasping, he had told me the rope was nothing but fancy. And if I should add a skeleton in a shroud to my story he would think I had taken leave of my senses altogether.

And I remembered, too, the undercurrent of resentment at my hint, slight as it was, that one of his men might have had something to do with the rope. I had no proof, not the breath of a clue to substantiate an accusation. And the fact that there was a passage and staircase giving easy access to the gallery from the card room did not necessarily mean that one of Richard's friends had used it.

Well, I thought, wearily getting to my feet and relighting the candle, was it possible that what I had seen was a ghostly apparition after all? Who was I to scoff at ghosts or hauntings? Did I not have strange dreams in which I pictured events that were taking place miles away? How could I explain that?

That night, as if to underline my questioning of the supernatural, I had another of those very dreams. I dreamt that Rosie had gone somewhere, and on the way back to Wuthersfield a man with a club had jumped out from a gap in the high hedge and had beaten her to death.

I awoke, sweating and shivering, from this nightmare to a timid tapping at the door. "I've brung your mornin' tea, m'um," Rosie called in response to my rather shaky, "Who's there?"

I was alone. It had been one of those nights

when Richard had not been to bed. "Come in, Rosie," I said, exasperated, depressed, the sour flavor of the dream still in my mouth.

She entered and set the tray down, shifting the pot, the tea cup, fussing over them with tiny, bird-like hands. Rosie had ambitions, she once shyly told me; she wanted to be a lady's maid. I said she could be mine (although the idea of having someone dress and undress me seemed silly) if I could get someone to replace her in the kitchen. I had even approached Richard on the matter but he claimed we had plenty of servants—why hire more?

"Will y'be wantin' anythin' else, m'um?" she asked.

"No, thank you. I can't think of a thing."

"Well . . . if that be all, I'll go on home then."

"Home?"

"Today be my day, m'um, my free day."

I sat bolt upright, the memory of the dream suddenly vivid and ominous. "But you can't!" I protested.

"But . . . but, m'um . . . Friday's always been my promised day. You never said . . . said . . . and they will be expectin' me at home. My mum was to fix over the dress you give me and t'was to be ready today. . ."

There were tears in her eyes. Of course, I could have forbidden her to go. I could have said, "You are to stay," invented some task or kept her without any explanation. She would think me cruel, unkind, heartless, but what did it matter if I saved her life?

"Rosie," I said, gently yet firmly, "I don't want you to go."

She stared at me in disbelief. Then her face screwed up like a monkey's, she whipped her apron over her eyes, and began to cry.

I pitied her, with all my heart I pitied her. Even though I saw to it that she performed no task I thought too much for her strength (she received her orders only from me, the men, surprisingly ignored her completely, as if she were no more than a piece of furniture), she worked hard and she had so little to look forward to. Her wages, I knew, she turned over to her family. She had never owned a new dress or a new pair of shoes in her life. And now I was taking the one bit of pleasure from her, the one bright spot in her week.

"Rosie," I said, drawing her close, "don't cry. A lady's maid *never* cries." She sniffed, wiping her nose with her apron. "Shall I tell you why I think it is best for you not to go home today?"

Her head bobbed.

And so I told her of the dream; a mistake, a terrible mistake committed out of vanity because I wanted Rosie to like me, to think well of me, a mistake I was later to regret.

But I had no such misgivings then and when I finished explaining my dream, Rosie stared at me with large, moist eyes. "And the dreams come true?"

"Yes, generally, that kind of dream does. Perhaps you could go home tomorrow?"

She shook her head. "T'is market day and none will be home." She puckered her brows. I

could see that she was battling with herself, her superstitious soul, believing and apprehensive, warring with her desire to have her free day as planned. "Oh. . . !" she said, her face suddenly brightening. "If I go today, Tom, my older brother will walk back with me. He's very strong."

I pondered that a few moments. "Yes . . . well, all right then," I relented. "But see that he does. And, Rosie, please . . . I'd rather you wouldn't tell anyone about . . . well, about my dream."

"All right, m'um. I promise."

As it turned out it was a promise she found impossible to keep.

I was sitting in front of the mirror, brushing my hair before dinner when she returned to Wuthersfield and knocked on my door. One look at the wax-like hue of her face and I knew that my dream, in part, at least, had come true.

"You was right, m'um," she said.

Haltingly, in bits and pieces, she gave me her story. They had all been glad to see her, she said. Her mother had finished her dress and she had tried it on to everyone's loud approval. The baby had recovered from its cough, her father, somewhat worried about the continued rain, was a bit grumpy, but in general the day had gone by without a quarrel or even a minor dispute—that is until it was time for Rosie to leave. As she was going out the door she suddenly remembered my dream, and she turned and asked her brother, Tom, to walk back with her.

He chided her, laughed, and when she persisted in her request, he angrily refused to go. He'd had a hard day in the fields and wasn't about to put his boots back on and go tramping the two miles to the manor. So Rosie, in desperation finally told him of my dream.

"He looked kind of . . . surprised," said Rosie. "And then my mum said, 'You'd best go, Tom,' and without another word he got into his boots and went out with me."

When they had come nearly the whole way and nothing happened, Rosie began to think she had coaxed her brother out unnecessarily. But suddenly the sound of running footsteps brought her round. There, looming over her, was Edward Weatherbee of Great Farm with a wicked looking stick in his hand. Before she could open her mouth to scream, Tom had ducked under Edward's upraised arm and with his ham-like fist had dealt the man a blow, knocking him senseless.

"Why did Edward Weatherbee attack you?" I asked Rosie when she had finished. "Did he have a grudge against you?"

"No, m'um, he mistook me for his wife."

It seemed that Edward had been recently married, for the second time, to a girl named Emily, a tiny, pretty thing of whom he was insanely jealous. That morning she had left, saying she was going to visit her mother and would be back in time for the noon meal. Lunch came and went, and as the afternoon wore on with still no sign of Emily, Edward began to get suspicious. By evening, after having drunk three

bottles of ale and a quantity of his wife's dandelion wine on an empty stomach, he was firmly convinced that Emily had never gone to see her mother but was dallying with a lover instead. Taking up a stout piece of timber he stationed himself at a place Emily must pass in order to reach home. In the oncoming darkness, filled with rage and drink, he had mistaken Rosie for his wife and but for Tom might have killed her.

Even in a rural neighborhood where gossip is one of the few available amusements, Rosie's story did the circuit in an amazingly short time. Embellished and added to it got back to Wuthersfield the next evening through Arthur who had heard the tale at the local tavern, my part in it far overshadowed Edward's or Tom's or Rosie's. Richard thought it marvelously amusing. "I did not know I'd married a seeress," he said, putting his arms about my waist and lifting me high, laughing, laughing. And because it was the first time in so long Richard had taken any real notice of me I laughed too.

If Richard was amused, Rosie's mother was grateful. She sent me two jars of her best blackberry jam and a scarf knitted with her own hands. I stopped by to thank her late one wet afternoon and a curious thing happened. While we were talking on the doorstep, a man, Rosie's father, came striding across the farmyard. He brushed rudely past me, and taking his wife by the elbow drew her roughly into the house, slamming the door in my face. He was angry, that much was plain, but why he was angry and at whom I did not know.

But I soon guessed. It was me. For shortly thereafter I noticed the people of the village, whenever I came into the shops, began to look at me with hooded, suspicious eyes, just as Rosie's father had done. I knew that look, having been the butt of it many times as a child when Grandmama and I made our weekly visits to Byrnne, a look which said, if you have powers for good, might you not have them for evil also? I tried to tell myself that I was reacting foolishly, in an oversensitive manner, that perhaps it was not me personally they disapproved of but the rumored goings on at Wuthersfield, the gambling and the drinking.

However another incident clearly revealed that my original assumption had been correct. One morning I discovered Sgt. Walls, who had supposedly done the marketing the day before, had forgotten half the items on my list—things we were very low on, coffee, flour and sugar. Exasperated I decided to go into Lyleton myself and Thomasin offered to accompany me.

We had taken the gig and were trotting along the high road bordered for a long stretch by a stubbled cornfield when I noticed Arthur's mastiff, the same one who had run away weeks earlier, streaking across the field after a smaller dog. He caught the animal and the poor creature set up such a piercing howl of pain I stopped the gig.

The mastiff began to worry the little dog, shaking it in its slavering jaws, dropping it, snapping it up again. Before Thomasin could say more than "Zillah, where are you

going. . . ?” I had jumped down from the gig, and drawing up my skirts, skipped across the narrow ditch. From the corner of my eye I saw a man and a woman with a child in her arms in the background watching me. I was a few feet from the mastiff when it let go of its victim and lifted its head.

I stopped dead in my tracks, facing the dog, my stomach swaying with nausea, for I saw at once it was rabid.

The dog, its agate eyes glazed over, its muzzle foaming, bared its sharp yellow fangs. I knew instinctively that if I were to turn and run the dog would attack, and I had nothing with which to ward him off. My one hope was that the man I had fleetingly seen would come to my rescue. In the meanwhile I dared not move, but stood there frozen, motionless, feeling utterly helpless. An ordinary angry or savage dog I might have stared down, but not a mad one.

Suddenly the dog snapped at the empty air. I heard the click of those lethal jaws and it was as if he had already sunk them into my flesh, and the poisoned venom was slowly entering my veins. My hands went clammy and I could feel a trickle of perspiration run down my back. Why didn't the man take a stick to the dog? Perhaps he was just as frightened as I. To be bitten by a rabid dog was to be sentenced to a horribly painful death.

The mastiff snapped again and then began to approach me, stiff legged, snarling low in his throat. He was within an arm's length when he stopped and began to whirl about crazily, try-

ing to bite his tail. He went round and round, faster and faster until he suddenly tumbled over. He lay there a few moments, his legs making convulsive movements, then was still.

A shadow fell across the dog and looking up I saw the man who had been watching. It was Rosie's father. "He's dead," he said. "The dog's dead." The woman, Rosie's mother came up to me and she said, "Are you all right, Mrs. Cates?"

"Yes . . . thank you," I answered, breathing deeply.

"Come away, Maude," Rosie's father said gruffly to his wife. "Don't speak to the likes of her. Can't yer see how she killed the dog with the evil eye?" And he took her by the arm and hurried her across the field.

When I got back into the gig Thomasin said, "I was petrified. I did not know what to do. I suppose I should have taken the buggy whip to it. But I could not move."

"I doubt the whip would have done any good. It was just as well you didn't move."

"What did that man have to say?"

"He said I had the evil eye," I answered scornfully.

"My dear, don't take what the locals say to heart. He probably thinks you killed that dog."

I gave her a long look. "But I didn't. He was rabid; he died."

"I know that," she said, "but these people prefer a supernatural explanation to a rational one. They enjoy being frightened. The man, in his addled head, I am sure, is convinced you are

a witch."

And, I remember, she laughed.

CHAPTER VII

I was not too surprised when Rosie failed to appear with my tea the following morning. Even before I went to look for her, climbing the backstairs to her small, simply furnished room under the eaves and saw it bare of her few possessions I had had the strong suspicion she had gone from Wuthersfield. I did not like to think her departure was due to her fear of me—she had never seemed afraid—but that her father had ordered her to come home.

That same afternoon I went round to her cottage and though I heard voices within, no one answered my knock. Next, I rode over to a neighboring farm, intending to inquire there, but the woman who came to the door, thrusting

her head round the edge, glared at me. "Go away," she said. "You'll get no one to work at the manor from here." And with that she slammed the door so hard the timbers groaned. I did not especially want a replacement for Rosie. I had grown quite fond of her. She was a bright little thing, quick to learn, loyal, warm hearted and totally unselfish. There were times when I felt that she was the only real friend I had at Wuthersfield.

But as the afternoon wore on and I went from cottage to cottage it was apparent that no one would give me the chance to explain, or even to argue. How could I state my case; that the dog had been rabid and died a natural death, when doors—if opened—were shut in my face before I could get a word out? One old crone finally ventured to tell me that people did not mind Wuthersfield's dead "haunt," but a living witch they could not abide.

I returned home, dejected, angry, thwarted, feeling like a caged animal bound hand and foot. When I told Thomasin that Rosie had gone and there was no chance of my getting another maid, she clucked her tongue, sympathized, smiled, and said, never mind she would lend me a hand.

Richard for his part said the local folk were all ignorant peasants, good riddance. "Don't you worry your pretty head about it," he said, chucking me under the chin. "The men will take on the extra chores gladly. I'll speak to Walls about it."

And for a day or two, to my surprise, all went

well; the fires were lit each morning, the floors swept, the downstairs rooms tidied. But then, gradually, bit by bit, the old neglect took over, the gray ash piling up over the grates, the dust gathering in corners, the stairs unswept, the lamps untrimmed, and the spiders, given free rein, began to patiently reweave their webs along the carved railings and over the mantels.

One morning I reminded Walls of his duties and, like Colby, he said, "Yes, Mrs. Cates. Of course, Mrs. Cates. I shall attend to it, Mrs. Cates." From the manner in which he spoke—just a shade removed from rude mockery—I expected little from Walls and he did not disappoint me.

Finally, out of sheer futility, I got a pail and scrub brush and getting down on my hands and knees began to scrub the kitchen floor which was thick with muck. I was so intent on my work, muttering angrily under my breath, I did not see Richard until he spoke.

"What in damnation are you doing?" he thundered, his eye blazing blue fire.

I got to my feet and faced him, a little pulse beating in my throat. "I don't enjoy living in filth," I said in a controlled voice.

"You don't?" he said, his face red with fury. He kicked the pail, overturning it.

I had never seen him lose his temper; I knew he had one, guessed that it could be violent, but now that its full force was directed at me, I felt a little afraid, afraid and resentful too. "A lady," he stormed at me, "would rather live in a pig sty than demean herself with a scullery

maid's work!"

"Perhaps you did not marry a lady then."

At that moment Thomasin came into the kitchen, but he gave her no notice. He looked at me speculatively, the fire slowly dying from his eye. "Nonsense. Leave that. And take that rag from your head." Then he turned and walked into the card room, slamming the door behind.

"My dear," Thomasin said, coming forward, "why didn't you ask Travis to do the floor?"

"I'm through asking Travis or any of them to do anything," I said bitterly.

"Now, now, my dear, you mustn't take things to heart," she chided, her voice honeyed with sympathy, but I had the strong feeling that secretly she thought me a fool.

Certainly my marriage had not turned out as I had pictured it. Perhaps my idea of matrimony had been overly romantic. Perhaps I had expected too much of Richard, who I was beginning to see would never be domesticated. I sometimes wondered why he had married me, whether his professed love was but a fleeting thing, and if he had begun to tire of me the moment he had carried me through the door of Wuthersfield. But such thoughts were painful and whenever I had them I would quickly push them aside, telling myself that I was selfish, spoiled to think I should always remain—as on our honeymoon—the one and only interest in Richard's life.

One afternoon we had a surprise visitor—

Malcolm Culpepper. He arrived in a hired chaise about three in the afternoon, looking very elegant and citified in a charcoal gray top-coat with an astrakhan collar. For all his fine clothes, however, he was still the same Malcolm, the knobby forehead, the earnest eyes and sweet, lovely smile. He was standing in the great hall, I remember, as I descended the stairs to greet him, and seeing him, an incongruous, yet dearly familiar figure under the vast, gloom shadowed ceiling, a sudden, overwhelming homesickness seized me. I picked up my skirts and ran to him, throwing my arms round his neck, burying my face on his shoulder, biting my lip to keep from weeping with joy.

I think he was a little shocked at the exuberance of my welcome, for when I stepped back and looked up at him his face was scarlet. "It . . . it is good to see you, Zillah," he said, stumbling, a little embarrassed.

"Dear Malcolm," I said, smiling. "I really did not mean to make such a dramatic entrance." It was the only thing I could think of saying. I could never explain that his appearance had brought back in a rush so many happy memories of the moor, good times when each day had opened before me like the lid lifted from a bon-bon box and I could pick and choose the delights within, those days before I had learned to play at "lady," before I learned of Richard, of love, of pain.

"Are you happy, Zillah?" Malcolm asked gravely, taking my hand.

Instantly I felt shame and remorse. How could I for one moment regret having married Richard? How enduring was *my* love? And had I so quickly forgotten that Richard was capable of making me happy, had done so, and, God willing, would do so again?

"Quite," I said, squeezing Malcolm's hand. "I couldn't be happier."

"I am pleased to hear you say that."

"Let me fetch Richard," I said. "Wait in the library. In there. I won't be a minute."

Richard was as surprised as I at our guest-the first, really, since coming to Wuthersfield. He rubbed his jaw and said, "Pity I hadn't shaved this morning, but I'm sure Culpepper won't mind."

As I preceded Richard through the kitchen I heard him ask Colby to bring a bottle and several glasses to the library.

If Richard was disgruntled at the interruption he hid it well. "Good to see you, Malcolm," he said pumping his hand.

"I had some business in Northridge," Malcolm explained. "And since I was close I thought I'd pop over to Wuthersfield."

"Glad you did. My cousins are out right now. You've never met them?"

"No," said Malcolm.

"Well, they should be back by dinner time. You'll stay?"

"Thank you, but I'm afraid not. I'm already promised. I must leave within the hour. Perhaps another time."

"Well, then," said Richard heartily. "We

may as well sit down."

Richard sat next to me and I looped my arm through his. "Are you liking the law?" I asked Malcolm.

"Fair to middling. I'm not all that keen on living in London, not as much as I had thought I would be."

"Do you miss the moor?" I asked.

He smiled. "Oddly enough, I do. I am having Moorsend completely remodeled, you know. Tearing out the old part—was an inn once, I understand—putting on a different facade, that sort of thing."

"Oh, yes," said Richard. "It could do with improvements, if I remember. Those newer houses are nothing like the old ones." Any house built after the sixteenth century was "new" to Richard. And though Moorsend had been erected a century earlier he considered it to be contemporary, the workmanship in it not up to long ago standards.

Colby came in with the wine and glasses. He had hastily donned a jacket and run a comb through his hair, neither of which had done much to disguise his rough and unbarbered appearance. Pouring the wine, he handed each of us a glass and when he came to Richard said, sotto voce, "Beggin' your pardon, Cap'n, but there's a little trouble we're havin' in the kitchen and your presence is needed."

"Oh?" said Richard, disengaging himself from me and rising immediately to his feet. "If you will excuse me, Malcolm? Zillah?"

I felt the blood sting my cheeks as I watched

him go out the door followed by Colby. I knew to the marrow of my bones that Colby's request had been a ruse, a prearranged ploy to get Richard back to his card game. Damn them all! It was humiliating to think Richard believed his gambling more important than spending a half hour entertaining a friend of mine.

"You have a servant problem, I take it," said Malcolm conversationally, breaking into my thoughts.

I looked at him, at his open, honest face and I had a sudden terrible desire to unburden myself, to tell him about Colby's snide rudeness, the card games which went on incessantly in the back room, the haunted gallery, but pride held my tongue. I could not reveal to him, to anyone, that I had moments of doubt and real fear, that I loathed Wuthersfield, that my marriage was faltering.

"Yes," I answered. "Richard seems to do better at smoothing things out than I."

There was a long silence while Malcolm gazed into his glass. "Zillah," he said finally, fixing me with those candid blue eyes of his. "I hope you don't think me presumptuous, but . . . but if there is something wrong, I wish you would feel free to tell me."

"Wrong?" I said, instantly on the defensive, forgetting that only a moment before I had resisted the impulse to pour all my troubles out to him. "There is *nothing* wrong. Why do you ask?"

"I . . . oh, I don't know. This place . . . it's rather gloomy, isn't it?"

Like a mother who can angrily scold her own child, but who resents a word said against it by others, I came instantly round to defending Wuthersfield. "A little, perhaps, for now. But it is very old, you see. It was built during the reign of Elizabeth," I said loftily, my voice sounding horribly snobbish even to my own ears. And then I went on to tell a brazen lie. "Richard and I are making plans to have it restored. Richard has already consulted an architect from London."

"Oh? Who?"

From the way he said, "who?" I knew he knew I was lying and suddenly I felt disgusted with myself and angry at him. "The name escapes me for the moment."

He turned the glass in his hands slowly, studying it. Then, abruptly, "Look, Zillah . . . are you sure everything is all right?"

"I'm very sure!" I snapped. A perverse anger like some unbidden demon had got hold of me. "And I don't relish your constant repetition of that stupid question." In the back of my mind I knew I was being unfair to Malcolm, but I could not seem to help it. "Did you come to see me, or to satisfy your curiosity?"

His face paled, bringing the freckles across his nose into sharp relief. "Is that what you think?" he asked.

"Malcolm. . . ,"

I began, instantly contrite, instantly sorry.

He got to his feet. "I think, Zillah, I have taken enough of your time."

"Malcolm. . . ."

"Don't bother to see me out." He strode across the room and the door slammed after him.

"Go, then!" I shouted at the closed door. "Go on! I don't care!" It was terrible. I felt as if I wanted to cry and to scream at the same time.

Later when Richard returned to the library I was staring glumly out the window. "Where's Malcolm?"

"He left."

"Left? So soon?"

"We quarreled," I said.

"About what?"

"Nothing really," I said with a heavy sigh. I remembered my vow to give Richard a dressing down for leaving us for what I presumed was his card game. But it did not seem very important now.

"I am surprised Malcolm had words with you," Richard said.

"Why is that?" I asked listlessly.

"The man is in love with you."

I looked at Richard. "Oh, no. You are mistaken."

"It's written all over the poor man's face. He is, Zillah." He poured himself a glass of wine. "Malcolm is in love with you."

I did not think Malcolm was anything of the sort. Richard was teasing me but I fell in with his game. "And you are not jealous?"

"Should I be?" he asked smiling, his eye holding me with that peculiar erotic fire that could melt my very bones.

"No," I said, smiling in return. "No."

Later I thought if only we could be *alone*—not at Wuthersfield but in some clean, even humble cottage without Arthur and Thomasin and all those “splendid fellows.” Alone. Just the two of us. How different things would be. But I did not see how it could ever be managed, how I would ever be rid of the men carousing in the card room below or how I could ever tear Richard from Wuthersfield. I pictured the years going by, myself growing old and bitter, the barrier between Richard and I turned into an insurmountable wall, and still the men living under our roof, nothing altered, nothing changed.

Then one night the situation came to a head.

It was a week after Rosie’s departure and I had gone up to my room and was getting ready for bed when I heard a staccato rat-a-tat-tat on the door.

“Who is it?” I called.

The knock came again. Thinking it might be Thomasin, I said in louder voice, “Come in!”

No answer, but that same imperative rapping.

I drew on my dressing gown and barefooted, started across the room. “Just a minute. . .”

From the other side of the door came a snicker, a low, repulsive, hollow titter.

The old paralyzing fear squeezed my heart with icy hands.

“Zillaaaaah. . . .” A hoarse whisper, a travesty of my name. “Zillaaaaah. . . .”

A man’s voice?

Yes, I thought, yes, anger sweeping past my

fear, a man's voice, not a ghost's. I raced to the door and flung it open. In the darkness of the passage I heard receding footsteps making for the staircase. Incensed now, I followed. When I got to the head of the stairs, I paused, craning my neck listening.

There! The quick padding of shoeless feet going down.

To this day I cannot exactly say why I didn't follow my impulse and rush pell mell after those footsteps. Perhaps the memory of my terrible experience on the gallery staircase was still too vivid in my mind. Or perhaps I sensed danger, smelled it in the dank, chilled air. Whatever it was I turned and hurried back to my room, snatched up the lamp and came back to the landing. As I stood there for a moment I caught the creaking sound of a door on the far side of the hall.

I started to descend, holding the lamp high, and ahead of me, four steps below, perhaps five, I saw something which turned me rigid. A length of black yarn had been tied tautly across the step so that anyone, unaware and in the dark, coming down quickly would fall over it, cascading the full span of the staircase to the stone floor below.

Any doubt that my intruder had been the ghostly Hangman vanished completely. No ghost would tie a string. I set the lamp down and jerked the yarn from its moorings. Black, a simple black piece of yarn that could be found in any woman's work basket, mine or Thomasin's, or tucked away in some forgotten drawer, an in-

nocent piece of string that could have killed me as easily as a revolver exploding at my head or a knife thrust through my heart.

I picked up the lamp and marched myself downstairs, across the hall and into the kitchen. As I stood there between the table and the zinc counter, hesitating, biting my lip, I remembered the last time I had come to the kitchen, angry and frightened by what had happened in the gallery, and the look of astonishment on Colby's face. Had he been startled to see me walking about, still alive?

I heard the men through the card room door, and I knew as though that door were made of glass that not one of them would be missing. There had been plenty of time for my visitor, with his obscene snicker, to return, slip into place at the table and resume his play. At the thought, anger began to boil in me, my legs trembled and my hands shook.

I put the lamp down on the table. I must compose myself, I thought—it would not do to burst into the cardroom and start shouting wildly, not making sense. I went to the cupboard to pour myself a glass of cider, mentally composing a speech which would sound factual and firm, yet convey my outrage. The cider had been placed on a high shelf and shoving a stool over I climbed up to reach it. As I was removing the jug something in the dark recesses of the angled cupboard caught my eye. I stuck my hand in and pulled out a gray length of cloth. It was the dark shroud, the grave clothes which had been wrapped around the "skeleton." The

Hangman's ghost.

I stared at the gray shroud in my hand and anger began to build up again, mounting, mounting with red, beating wings to my temples. I got off the stool, kicking it aside, and still clutching the shroud, slammed the card room door wide.

Six astonished faces looked up.

"That!" I shouted, striding up to the table and flinging the gray cloth across, scattering the cards. "Who is responsible for *that*? Who, here, thinks I am ninny enough to be scared by a child's masquerade, to be scared out of my wits, to kill myself falling downstairs? Who?" I knew my voice had become shrill but I could not help it. "*Who . . . who* is responsible. . . ?"

"Zillah. . . ," Richard said, slowly rising to his feet. "Zillah. . ."

"I will *not* be quiet!" I shouted, out of control, tasting the white froth of my rage. "I won't be quiet! I have been quiet long enough. Someone here is bent on getting rid of me. And I will not have it. Do you hear? I will not have it! I will not have it!"

No one said anything.

The men kept staring at me with astonished eyes. Richard's face was the color of ash. He moved his lips, but no sound came. The lamp hung from the ceiling flickered once, twice over the frozen tableau. The scene wavered, blurred, and I could feel the sting of tears pressing my eyeballs. I turned then and fled.

Richard found me five minutes later sobbing

on the bed.

"What's this?" he asked rather gruffly. Richard had never known me to cry and I was not one who cried easily. I knew he detested weeping women; they made him itchy and uncomfortable he once said. But I was not made of stone and it had all become simply too much.

"What's this all about?" Richard demanded in the same harsh voice.

I sat up, drying my eyes on the hem of my dressing gown. "I . . . I . . . they have provoked me. . ."

"Who? Was that why we had that ugly scene downstairs? You bursting in and screaming like a fishwife?"

The "fishwife" stung deeply. Anger elbowed self-pity aside. "Well, then," I said, getting to my feet and thrusting my face up into Richard's. "What would you do if twice in a month an attempt had been made on your life?"

"Your life?" he asked in bewilderment. "Please, Zillah, make sense."

"I am talking about *my* life. *Mine*. I am talking about make believe ghosts and nooses and. . ."

"Ghosts? Nooses? I really don't understand any of this."

I swallowed and sat down on the bed, folding my hands tightly in my lap. "All right. I will tell you the whole story right from the beginning. Promise not to interrupt?"

"I promise."

So I told him about The Hangman, about my tumble down the gallery steps, and how I nar-

rowly missed falling again a half hour earlier if I had not taken the lamp from my room. "And that gray cloth I flung on the table . . . like a . . . a fishwife," I could not help adding, ". . . that was the shroud the so-called ghost was wearing. I found it hidden in a kitchen cupboard. . . ."

"And. . . ?"

"And . . . well, isn't it obvious?"

"You think one of my men is trying to frighten . . . to *kill* you?"

"Yes, and I would not be one bit surprised if they were all in the . . . the plot together."

"A plot," he repeated, his eyebrows raised, his gaze dubious.

"A plot to get rid of me, so they can have the house to themselves. I'm an irritant, don't you see? My presence alone gets their dander up. They won't take orders from me. They *hate* me. They want to be rid of me."

He gave me a long look. "I think you are mistaken, Zillah."

"How? I knew you would take up for your men. How could I be mistaken?" I dug into the pocket of my dressing gown. "Here is the piece of yarn." I held it up, realizing at once what a flimsy piece of evidence it was. But still I went on. "Why don't you ask? Ask which one of them came to my door tonight."

He stroked his chin meditatively. "Zillah, there's no reason why any of them should want to harm you, why they should want to be rid of you. You see . . . I had meant to tell you sooner, but they all plan to depart by Satur-

day."

"All of them?"

"All of them."

"But then . . . why. . . ?"

"Yes, that is exactly it. Why?" He came and sat beside me on the bed, taking my hand in his. "Perhaps you had a bad dream?"

I shook my head vehemently. "No, I was awake. I hadn't gotten into bed yet." I was as certain that what had happened to me was real as I was of my two hands and my two feet. Yet the fact that the men had no reason to get themselves up like ghosts or to trip me on the stairs opened a new and frightening train of thought. Who then had I seen in the gallery? Who had knocked at my door? Or, worse—what?

I shivered and Richard thinking I was cold went over to the fireplace and stirred up the fire.

"Richard," I said, watching him, "why have the men decided to leave?"

"Oh—they are a restless lot," he answered casually.

"Was it because of me?"

"No . . . not because of you." He did not look at me but remained kneeling, prodding at the fire with a poker. He seemed to have become suddenly quiet, reticent, and I had the feeling he had something embarrassing or unpleasant to tell me. For a few dreadful moments I feared that he was going to say that he was leaving too. The thought was like a hard, undigested stone in my chest. For all my past mo-

ments of regret, for all my wondering, my day-dreams of the moor, I knew I could not bear it if Richard went from me.

"Richard," I said, unable to endure the silence any longer, "Is there something . . . something you are hiding from me?"

His continued silence told me I had guessed correctly. I saw it all then, saw it in the angle of his half turned head, the firelight gleaming reddish-gold on his hair. Soon he would get to his feet, face me. "I must go, Zillah. I am sorry but I realize now I've not the makings of a husband." And he would take his things from the wardrobe while I sat by, dry eyed, desolate, watching him pack. What would become of me? What should I do? Where would I go? I pictured myself at the depot inquiring of trains to Castlebridge, wiring ahead for Mr. Coombs to meet me. . .

"Zillah," Richard said suddenly, still not looking at me. "The truth of the matter is I asked the men to go." He rose and came over to where I sat, numb and forlorn, looking up at him. "You see, I lost all my money at cards. . ."

"All your money?" I frowned, not understanding, still deep in my picture of the train station at Castlebridge.

"Yes, all my money, my pay. . ."

I stared at him. Richard was on half pay from the Army. It was this money together with my allowance we lived on.

"Yes, my pay. And your dowry too." My

dowry, stipulated in Grandmama's will, was five hundred pounds. "I'm sorry darling."

In spite of Grandmama's secret wealth, thrift had been bred into my very bones. I had been brought up with a healthy respect for money, for seeing to it that each shilling spent received a shilling's worth in return. And now what Richard was trying to tell me became suddenly, painfully clear.

"All my dowry?" I asked. "How could you?"

"How could I?" He sighed. "I did, that's all. You can't imagine what a fool I feel. How sorry I am." He knelt at my feet. "I haven't been much of a husband to you, have I?" He kissed my hands.

"Five hundred pounds?" All those hours, the days and the long nights, the ale going down, the slap of the cards, the grunts, and now that I recalled after the first week or two very little laughter. Why laugh? They were gambling for high stakes then, a serious matter. Five hundred pounds.

"Abominable luck," Richard said. "For a time it looked as if I could win it all back and more besides. But the turn of a card—the wrong card—and it was gone." He kissed my hands again. "Will you ever forgive me? Please, darling, say you will." His eye was earnest, imploring, and as I gazed into his face I realized something about Richard which had never occurred to me before.

For all his powerful shoulders, his strong arms, the eye which could pierce like an eagle's, the romantic, swashbuckling aura which he

wore like a crown, Richard had his weaknesses. He was mortal. Some men might drink, others philander, beat their wives. Richard gambled. I should have guessed long ago that he was obsessed with cards. Hadn't Augusta told me that Richard had gone through his inheritance in a short time? The money he had received from his uncle had certainly not been put into falling-down, ruined Wuthersfield, nor into fine clothes or jewels or horseflesh. When we married he had said, quite frankly, "I have nothing but my half pay and Wuthersfield." So by then he must have already lost his entire legacy gambling at cards.

"I do love you," Richard was saying. "Will you forgive me, my darling?"

I looked at him, the eye which now shone with love, the shape of his head, the fine, mobile lines of his mouth, that sweet, enchanting mouth, the hands which could give so much tenderness and pleasure and I thought, am I making too much over the loss of five hundred pounds?

"Of course, I forgive you." I bent and kissed his forehead. "And I love you, too."

Yes, I did love him. But it was not the same love, the adoration, the worship, the love of a young girl for a god. My love was no less than it had been before, but somehow, in some way it had changed.

"You are an angel," Richard said, sitting beside me, hugging and kissing me. "A perfect angel. And I swear I will make it up to you." He took my hand and kissed my fingers one by one.

We sat side by side holding hands for a few minutes and then he said, "We ought to go away, you and I. Just the two of us. Would you like that?"

"Oh, Richard—I would *love* it!"

"You aren't very fond of Wuthersfield, are you?"

"No, not very fond."

"Suppose we go on a trip, a voyage. . ."

"To Paris. . . ?" We had been happy there.

"Well, no. That is not what I had in mind."

He smiled, the old devil-may-care look coming to his eye.

"I'd like that."

"And when we get back I shall buy you a fine house, a proper house, staffed with proper servants."

So he *had* noticed the deplorable conditions under which we lived. "Really, Richard," I said, laughing. "And what shall we use for money?" He looked at me with raised brows and I suddenly remembered the trust. "Grandmama's money, of course," I said.

"Yes . . . well . . . I had hoped we would not have to touch it." He got to his feet and went over to the fire. Then he began to pace up and down in front of it, his hands behind his back. "No, it would not be right."

"Why wouldn't it?" I said. "I think it is entirely right. Grandmama would never have objected to using the money to buy a house. I'll write to Mr. Coombs first thing in the morning. Perhaps he knows of some property for sale. And he could handle the whole transaction

too."

Richard sat down beside me again. "Zillah . . . I have a better idea. I would like to borrow a sum of money from you."

"Borrow?" A faint suspicion crept into my mind. "Borrow for what?"

"The chance of a lifetime. The return of your money will be a thousand fold." His eye danced with excitement. "Zillah, it's gold!"

"Gold? Where?"

"A Spanish galleon off the coast of Scotland. A friend—McFarland's his name—wrote and said he saw it. A galleon sunk at the time of the Armada. You know they were reputed to have carried gold . . . and. . ."

"Reputed, yes, but not all of them were, I'm sure."

"Ah, yes, but supposing this one did carry gold? You see, Zillah," he said eagerly, "if we could get her up we'd be on to a fortune. I know it. I'm sure of it."

"And your friend saw this ship?"

"Yes. He's a fisher. One day when he was ready to come to shore he found his anchor had fouled. So he went down to free it and there was the old ship thick with barnacles, but he could tell she was Spanish and a galleon."

"How much would it cost to raise her?"

"Oh . . . I'd say about a thousand pounds. That should do it. What do you say, Zillah?"

"I . . . I don't really know." My heart sank.

"We can't lose, darling."

Richard had already forgotten his debacle at cards and was ready to take on a new, more ex-

citing gamble. Here, I had barely succeeded in convincing myself that the loss of five hundred pounds hardly mattered and now he was proposing to risk a thousand. The practical, frugal side of myself took over. I found the idea of Spanish galleons and buried treasure foolish.

But Richard was so earnest, so eager, so convinced that he could make a fortune for us. Was I being miserly, petty to refuse? Did one thousand pounds mean that much to me?

But oddly enough I did not feel it was mine to give that easily. Grandmama, I knew, had meant her savings for my protection and my children's, a house, or a good farm, something utilitarian. But to invest it in a rainbow chase for fool's gold? And after that what? Diamonds in Brazil, a sure horse in the fifth race at Ascot, one wild scheme following another? I might become like Thomasin, then, a woman whose husband had lost at everything, forced to live on the cold charity of others.

"Well . . . Zillah. . . ?"

"Let me think about it, Richard."

"What's there to think about? We may never have this chance again."

"Just until tomorrow? I'm so tired tonight."

"Of course, my darling," he agreed, kissing me.

That night I lay for a long time next to a sleeping Richard, his arm flung carelessly out across my waist, staring at the ceiling, watching the moving shadows made by the firelight, my mind thronging with thoughts of Richard and Grandmama and Spanish galleons. Not until I

was sinking down into sleep did I suddenly remember with a quick stab to the heart the ghostly rat-a-tat at my door, the piece of yarn across the staircase and how the identity of my sinister night caller still remained a mystery.

CHAPTER VIII

I awoke at first light, a dawn gray and murky with rain. Richard was still sleeping, lying on his stomach, hugging the pillow. The hair at the nape of his neck curling in fine spun whorls gave him a youthful, almost boyish appearance. So vulnerable. I bent and kissed him there. He shifted his head, muttering something about gold, but did not open his eyes.

I lay back and looked at the sky. Spanish ships and gold. The memory of the previous night's conversation stirred like a dead weight inside me. I thought upon it, pondered, turned it every which way in my mind and finally came to a decision.

I simply could not take a thousand pounds

from my capital and throw it away on a dubious scheme. But how to tell him? I dreaded it, for no matter how I phrased my argument I knew I could not help sounding like a tightfisted penny pincher. It was an ordeal I anticipated without relish.

I slipped quietly out of bed and into my clothes and stole down the stairs to the stables. There I saddled Sabina and took her for a long gallop across the wet countryside thinking to put off for as long as I could my meeting with Richard. But I could not stay away forever and when I returned Richard was waiting for me in the yard. He helped me dismount. "You're out early," he said.

"I wanted some air," I replied, grasping the reins and starting to lead Sabina inside.

He followed me. Together we fed and watered the mare. "Rather damp this morning," Richard said.

"I don't mind the damp."

Richard was silent until we started to walk toward the house. "You've been thinking about my proposal?" he asked.

"Yes," I said in a small voice, suddenly wishing that the man McFarland had never been born, that there had never been a Spanish Armada, or a galleon sunk off the coast of Scotland, but wishing most of all that Grandmama had died a pauper, leaving me penniless.

"And what have you decided?" Richard took my elbow and turned me about so that I must face him and look into his eye.

"I have decided against it." I said quickly. as

if I were swallowing a spoonful of bitter medicine.

He said nothing. I felt his hand stiffen, then he dropped it from my elbow. A slow dusty red had spread over his features. We stood there while the silent moments stretched, facing one another, his eye holding me like a skewered moth.

Presently I started to talk, explaining very carefully, reasonably, I thought, why I felt such a loan was inadvisable. "I would gladly give it for a house, or some sound commercial enterprise," I ended lamely.

"Yes, indeed you would," he said, scornfully. "It would please you if I became a shopkeeper, grubbing away behind a counter, wearing an apron. 'Yes, m'am. No, m'am. Can I show you the latest in shifts, m'am.' "

"No, Richard, I. . ."

"No? I am sure you must realize how difficult it is for a man like me to beg from a woman, so I shan't beg. Perhaps you will reconsider and change your mind." And with that he left me abruptly, striding across the yard and into the house.

My first impulse was to run after him, to tell him, yes, he could have the money, all of it and more besides, anything to erase that angry look on his face, the jeer in his voice. But a kind of mulish pride held me back. I could not grovel or beg either.

We did not speak of Spanish galleons again. Coldly polite to one another we were like two foreign diplomats observing courteous protocol

in the presence of others as well as in the privacy of our bedchamber. Neither of us would break or yeild an inch. I sometimes had the insane desire to laugh at it all; Richard and I were so closely matched, both stiff legged, haughty. But more often than not I felt closer to tears, though I never showed it. Whatever crying I did was done silently, deep down inside.

The men left early on Saturday. I was not sorry to see the last of them, but for Richard their going must have represented some kind of defeat. He shut himself up in the library with a supply of brandy all that day and the next, only emerging to fetch a fresh bottle. My heart went out to him and I thought again of relenting in the matter of the thousand pounds, but by then my stubbornness had hardened to the point where I could not have said "I'm sorry" if my life depended upon it. Besides I had a more immediate problem—the business of keeping us fairly comfortable in a huge house without a single servant.

Hard work I did not mind. Grandmama and I had always done everything ourselves, but then there had been only the two of us and a small cottage, easy to keep. Wuthersfield, however, loomed around and over me, a dusty catacomb of rooms and stairways, and cold, always cold. Where to begin? What to do first? How shall I get everything done? These questions plagued me.

Cook I had to—otherwise we would starve. On the day the men left I was in the kitchen

preparing our noon meal when Thomasin came in and offered her assistance. In the past her help had been more in the line of advice, chatter, and an occasional wielding of a feather duster. She did sometimes suffer from disabling headaches, but in the main I had thought her lazy.

Now, to my surprise, she tied on an apron and said, "Did you know I can make a fine trifle when I have a mind to?" And then she proceeded very efficiently to do just that.

Since Richard refused to budge from the library, we ate without him, taking our meal at the kitchen table. It seemed simpler that way. I was quite pleased to find that I had not lost my knack for cooking; the joint was tender, the vegetables simmered to a tasty, but not mushy, texture, and Thomasin's rum, macaroon trifle delicious. "You see how well we've managed," Thomasin said.

"Yes, but there's the washing up to do, the fires to light, the ashes to haul."

"I'll be happy to divide the chores," Thomasin offered. "And Arthur won't mind taking care of the fireplaces, will you Arthur?"

"Certainly not. You can count on me."

They both seemed sincere and I felt that perhaps I had judged them unkindly in the past. "Thank you," I said. "But I have been thinking. I believe I'll write to Mrs. Coombs and ask her if she knows of any girl anxious to go into service."

"From Byrnne?" Thomasin asked. "Isn't that rather a long way?"

Arthur, his mouth full of trifle, spoke up. "If they're poor enough they'll go anywhere, all the way to London if necessary. Too much rain this year. A bad harvest and most of the locals are going to have it hard. I should think there would be dozens of girls in the neighborhood willing to work."

"I've tried," I said. "No one who has ever heard of Wuthersfield will come."

"Oh, yes," said Arthur. "I'd forgotten. But that is so much rot. You being a witch." He grinned at me, a dab of cream on his chin.

"Rot or no," I said. "*They* believe it."

I wrote to Mrs. Coombs that afternoon and Arthur took my letter into Lyleton to be posted. In the meanwhile I did what I could and let what I couldn't do slide. I was careful not to let Richard see me at the heavier tasks thus irritating him further. I thought we would be much better off to lease a house and leave Wuthersfield—my income was substantial enough—but Richard would not hear of it, apparently forgetting his earlier offer to get a "proper" house with "proper" servants. Wuthersfield had been in the Cates family for upwards of three hundred years, he reminded me, and he would not abandon it. In vain did I point out that he need not *sell* it, that his uncle had chosen not to live in it, but each argument I brought forth only served to make him more obdurate, until finally he sunk into silent gloom, refusing to discuss it any further.

Weeks went by and still there was no reply from Mrs. Coombs. Perhaps I had asked her an

impossible favor. My name apparently was no more popular in Byrnne than it was in Lyleton. No one, no matter how poor, or what hard times they faced wanted to come to Wuthersfield.

And the weather was growing colder. Without having had any summer to speak of, autumn was already upon us, bringing crackling hoarfrost mornings and a wind which tore the leaves from the trees, whipping them along in brittle whirlpools across the unkempt lawns. Though the fires burned brightly on the hearths for a good part of the day now, the house remained chill and drafty.

The hall especially was like an icehouse. Several times I felt that peculiar earthy draft which had previously accompanied the appearance of the noose and The Hangman's ghost, and though I fearfully half expected to see another manifestation nothing of that sort ever happened again.

I finally settled the mystery in my mind by deciding that one of Richard's comrades had used the disguise as a spiteful way of getting back at me. Perhaps they had all thought that but for my presence Richard would have let them stay on, giving them the opportunity to win even more from him—Wuthersfield itself.

One afternoon I thought I would make the rounds of the upper regions of the house to see if there were any broken or open windows which could be sealed against the ever increasing cold. Richard and Arthur were in the kitchen, I remember, playing cards. Thomasin was sitting by the fire with her work basket, mending

linen, when I took a lamp and went up the back stairs. The unused portion of the house was a crazy warren of passages and rooms, shuttered, airless, smelling of dust and neglect. I had the feeling that I was the first human who had trod those creaking floor boards for at least a hundred years. Some of the rooms were completely empty, some had furnishings shrouded in yellowed sheets, the carpets rolled up and pushed to a side.

One room, however, was neither shrouded nor empty. A strange, eerie room, it contained a large bed, the canopy hung with cobwebs, the silken coverlet faded and partially eaten away by rats and mice, two hardwood chests embellished with low relief designs, and a clouded, gilt framed mirror sitting on a cross legged table.

It seemed to me a girl's or a young woman's room because of an array of murky glass bottles placed in front of the mirror. The coverlet on the bed was turned down, as if the occupant had been on her way to bed when something or someone had suddenly changed her mind. I wondered if this faded, decaying boudoir had once belonged to Gwendolyn Cates, the supposed witch who had cheated the hangman.

As I stood there gazing about me I heard the wind sigh and tap upon the shuttered window and sigh again, a sigh so sad, so human it sent a shiver down my spine. A dark shadow scurried across the floor, a shadow similar to the ones which I now knew belonged to the many rats infesting the house. They and the spiders were

masters here now. It made me want to weep.

Turning, I went out into the passage again and paused for a moment, trying to get my bearings. All the doors looked alike to me, the passage exactly the same as so many others I had wandered through. I had the exasperated yet uneasy feeling that I was lost.

I hesitated a few moments in the silence when suddenly my ears caught the sound of a scraping hinge.

A low rusty squeak.

My heart leapt to my mouth, my eyes rolling slowly first to the left and then to the right. The silence ticked; a board settled itself. Was someone behind one of those anonymous doors secretly watching me through a crack?

I thought of the girl witch who had died by her own hand and the cheated hangman, their spirits restless, forever haunting the corridors of Wuthersfield. I thought too of a host of others, people who had long ago spoken, laughed, loved, cried, slept in these rooms, people whose ghosts might resent me as an intruder, an alien.

The hinge scraped again.

A shutter creaking in the wind? Most of the shutters were in disrepair, broken, their fastenings long since rusted away. Surely that noise was made by nothing more than a shutter, I thought, my ears straining for another sound.

It came. A small indrawn breath.

Panic swept like an icy tide through my veins. I picked up my skirts and ran down the passage, taking the first staircase, stumbling downward in my haste.

I had no idea who or what was behind me; I did not wish to know. My only thought was to flee to the safety of the kitchen. As luck would have it I missed the last step and went staggering across the landing, clutching at the opposite wall with one hand (the other grimly hanging on to the lamp) to keep from falling. To my amazement, a panel in the wall began to slowly open, revealing a drafty passage beyond. From it came the strong scent of newly turned earth.

I stared at the opening, my curiosity struggling with my fear. Finally, deciding what I had fled was behind me, upstairs, not here, I stepped cautiously through. The passage I found myself in was a short one enclosed with stone walls but roofless, giving out to the open sky. There was a staircase going down at the other end and I took it, coming to a door at the bottom which I opened. It was knobless on the outside, a secret door leading to what had once been the kitchen garden at the back of the house. The earth had been turned there; Arthur, I think it was, having played with the idea of putting in some herbs and vegetables.

I had never realized there was another entrance to the house, a secret door and passage, and it intrigued me. My fright now pushed to the back of my mind, I went up the stairs again. Walking toward the sliding panel, I passed a window set in a wooden door I had not noticed earlier. The window was thick with dust and I could see nothing through it. However it was on a latch, and undoing it I found it had been covered with a thick piece of canvas.

I nudged the canvas with my hand, then pushed it aside and suddenly I was looking across the gallery down into the great hall below.

I understood then where the odd smelling draft had come from. One of the pictures in the gallery hid the window and the upper half of the door and someone had watched me through that window, perhaps thrown the rope over the balcony rail from there too. But worst of all, only yesterday I had felt that draft—and the men were two weeks gone! I could no longer blame them for the noose and the shrouded figure.

Unless, I speculated, *unless* one of them had not really departed. Walls or Colby could have secreted themselves in one of the myriad rooms in the house and who would know? I recalled with a shiver that creaking hinge, the indrawn breath.

I shut the window quickly and went down the outer staircase, around the house and into the kitchen. Thomasin was still there by the fire. The men, she said, had gone out to shoot partridge.

Later I told Richard about the balcony and the window but he seemed neither surprised or particularly interested. When I said I felt I had been spied upon he gave me a peculiar look. "Why should anyone want to spy on you? And in the great hall of all places."

"Someone with a grudge," I ventured cautiously. "Someone hiding in the house?"

"My God, Zillah, you do have an imagina-

tion. Perhaps it's that hangman ghost you thought you saw earlier, or maybe it's a long dead Cates come back to watch you cross the hall with broom and mop."

I could see that we would soon be into a squabble followed by another of Richard's freezing silences, so I did not pursue the subject. Thomasin, when I told her of the window, was just as skeptical. She saw no relationship between the peephole and the draft in the hall, no reason why any of Richard's cronies should want to hang about. "After all," she pointed out reasonably, "they did win a tidy sum at cards."

"But that window is hidden behind a picture, one of the portraits," I protested. "It was *meant* for spying."

"A good many old houses have peepholes," she explained, "probably put there ages ago at the time the Royalists were fighting it out with Cromwell's men. Most big houses were secretly on the side of the king, and I have no doubt the Cates family who owned this one was too. It was to the advantage of Royalist sympathizers to observe, without being seen, all those who came into the house. I would be much surprised if any of Richard's friends even knew of the peephole's existence."

Thomasin's words did not reassure me. If anything they made me more apprehensive than ever. If there was a spy hole in the gallery might there not also be one in the library? Or in the dining room? Or in my bedroom upstairs? Whatever Richard had said (and Thomasin too)

I still did not rule out the possibility of someone hiding in the upper stories of the house. A man could probably live a lifetime hidden in one of these shrouded rooms without anyone being the wiser.

But, I thought, wouldn't he have to emerge occasionally to forage for food?

And so fixed in my mind was the idea that Wuthersfield harbored someone unseen, unknown to us, I began to keep a careful watch on our supply of food, checking each morning to see if an unexplained depletion of our stores had occurred during the night. I soon realized, however, that it was useless to count bread loaves and bottles of wine and rounds of cheese: Arthur and Richard were both inveterate snackers, and there was no way of telling how much they took unless I stationed myself at the pantry door all day and half the night.

I tried to put the whole thing from my mind. But sometimes as I sat in the library of a cold evening, Thomasin on the other side of the fire, mending or knitting, I with my book, I would find my gaze slowly going round the room, staring at each picture on the wall, wondering if behind this one or that was a pair of watching eyes. I had already examined the walls of my bedroom and found nothing suspicious, but I had not dared search the library for fear someone would catch me at it and think I had gone silly in the head.

Then one night, unable to sleep, I crept down to the deserted library. It was late and everyone had gone to bed hours earlier, so there was little

chance of an unexpected intrusion. Using the ladder hooked to the book shelves I went from picture to picture, lifting them, peering behind, to see if any had false backs. There were several pictures too high for me to reach, and at the end, for all my pains, I never did satisfy myself completely.

But then something happened which for a time, pushed my fears and suspicions out of mind. Rosie returned to Wuthersfield.

She came toward dusk of a chilly, gray day, tapping at the kitchen window. I had been sitting at the table, shelling beans and when I looked up and saw her face flattened grotesquely against the glass I had a momentary shock. But then, recognizing her, my shock was replaced by astonishment and delight. I ran to open the door.

She said nothing but crept across the sill, looking like a starved pup. Always thin, she had melted down to a mere rag bag of skin and bones, her bruised eyes enormous hollows in a skull face. "Rosie. . . , " I asked, "have you come back?"

She looked at me out of those hungry eyes, the tears gathering slowly. She started to speak, then lowered her head and began to cry. I took her in my arms and let her sob, stroking her hair gently. "Come by the fire, child," I said when her sobs had subsided. "You are as cold as ice. And I daresay hungry."

I sat her down on a stool before the fire and busied myself with the kettle and teapot, watching her from the corner of my eye. She sat

silent, very still staring into the flames, the scrap of shawl she wore clutched tightly by one claw-like hand.

"I've missed you so," I said.

She turned. "Did you, m'um?" A ghost of a smile lit her scarecrow face.

"Indeed."

She did not speak again until I set a steaming cup and a plate of bread and cheese before her.

"For me, m'um?" she asked, doubtfully.

"Yes, go ahead, don't be shy. It's for you. All of it."

"Thank you, m'um. You always been kind to me."

I busied myself with the beans while she ate and drank, aware from the sounds she made that she was wolfing the food down. Poor thing. When she was finished, she got up and carried the cup and plate to the counter. Her shawl had slipped from her shoulders and I saw she had a large, ugly bruise down one side of her neck.

"Would you like more?" I asked.

"No, m'um." she said, her back to me. Then she turned suddenly. "I run away from home." she blurted out.

"Run away?" I said, dismayed. "But your father . . . won't he come looking for you?"

"I . . . I don't thinks so, m'um. I think he's glad to be rid of me. Besides he won't come here. Nothin'll make him come here."

"Why did you run away?"

"I . . . I spilled the milk, you see, and he beat me. He . . . well t'wasn't his fault really, m'um, he's not naturally a mean man." From

the broken account which followed I was able to piece together Rosie's sad story.

Times were hard in the Pike household what with all those hungry mouths to feed and the harvest poor. Rosie, whose task it had been to help with milking had upset a pail, spilling the precious milk over the barn floor. Her father, in a rage, had set upon her with a stick, beating her unmercifully, shouting that she was a parasite, all of them were, leeching the life's blood from him. Nursing her wound in a corner of the cowshed, Rosie had decided that it would be best for the family if she left home. "And I thought of Wuthersfield, m'um."

"You aren't afraid of me?" I asked, smiling.

"No, m'um," she said. "You won't send me back, m'um?"

"You are sure your father won't be angry?"

"No, m'um."

"Then you may stay."

To my embarrassment she grasped my hand and kissed it.

It was marvelous what Rosie's return did for my spirits. For a time while we dusted and scrubbed and polished and washed I forgot about my fears, my suspicions. In fact, there were moments when in retrospect I thought that perhaps Richard had been right in calling me highly imaginative. I heard no more mysterious raps upon the door, felt no sudden chilling drafts in the hall, saw no ghostly manifestations of any kind.

The rats at Wuthersfield, however, were real enough. They grew steadily in number and the

yard cat I had brought into the house did not seem particularly keen on hunting them down. I had tried trapping them too and though I managed to catch one now and again, the horde—for it seemed to have grown to that—did not diminish.

“Poison’s the only way to get rid of them,” Thomasin said to me one morning after breakfast. “They’re a tough breed, field rats. They always come inside when the pickings are poor elsewhere.”

“I suppose I can get some at the chemist’s in Lyleton, then. Would you like to come in with me?”

“I think not, dear,” she said, smiling. “I have one of my abominable headaches. Could you do something for me, though?”

“What’s that?”

“I’ve run out of my headache tablets and I thought since you are going to the chemist’s you might get me some.”

“Certainly.”

It was a crisp October morning, the first clear day in so long, the sun shining, a yellow blaze of light in a mellow blue sky. Leaves still clung to the beeches, the oaks and ash, fluttering amber, yellow and flame in a soft little wind redolent of apples and woodsmoke.

It is a day to be happy, I remembered thinking, a day when every living creature from the lowliest laborer to the lord in his manor should rejoice. But the few faces I passed on the way looked grim; the women gleaning the last bit of a meager crop, the children staring at me with

large, starving eyes. And as for the lord of the manor, though Richard no longer sulked, though we spoke now, though he sometimes even laughed, I knew him to be far from a happy man.

I sighed, a heavy, leaden sigh. And what of me? I, who used to revel in every season, in every weather, now looked at the loveliness around me and felt only sad. Had I changed so, then, become discontented, spoiled, old before my time? In the not too distant past I had encountered indifferent, if not unfriendly neighbors, had lived in far from a sumptuous house, had been forced to do menial tasks, and I had never minded, was quite content, in fact.

Ah, I thought, but that was before Richard, before Wuthersfield, before fear.

With these thoughts milling about in my head I reached the chemist's shortly before noon, a tiny shop shelved with dusty bottles, thick with the aroma of anise and garlic, an odor faintly reminiscent of Grandmama's cottage on the moor. The counter was at the back and there Mr. Trundle presided, a bespectacled, very tall, hollow-chested man. He remembered me from a previous visit when I had come in with Thomasin. On that occasion he had been most friendly, rather effusive, in fact, and had chatted on about a new face cream guaranteed to keep a lady's skin young and smooth, no matter what her age. But now he was cold business, polite, but unsmiling, and far from loquacious.

"And what can I do for you, Mrs. Cates?" he

asked, rubbing his hands together briskly.

I told him about our rodent problem at Wuthersfield.

"Ah—rat poison," he said, giving me an odd look. And it flashed through my mind; perhaps he thinks the poison is superfluous since I have the "evil eye" and can kill the ugly pests with only a glance. "I have exactly what you need here." He turned and reaching up to a shelf brought down a jar. "Will you be needing a small or large amount?"

"Large, I expect."

He nodded and proceeded to make up a packet. "There's been much complaint about rats this year," he said in, what seemed to me a friendlier tone. Perhaps I had imagined his coldness, taken his disinclination to chatter on this particular day as a personal affront. Perhaps I was too thin-skinned, too sensitive.

Two customers came in at that moment, a florid faced man of middle years and a stout woman who I took to be his wife. They murmured a good morning, the woman staring rather rudely at me, although I couldn't think why, since I was sure I had never seen her before.

"That will be two shillings, sixpence," said Mr. Trundle.

I handed him the exact change. "Thank you," I said, taking the packet.

I was through the door and had nearly closed it when I suddenly remembered Thomasin's headache tablets. I turned and starting back to the counter heard Mr. Trundle say, "Yes, that

was her." I paused, as he went on. "They say her grandmother was a witch near Byrnne. Called her the witch of the moors. Me—I don't believe in such things." This last with a superior air.

"Well. . ." I heard the woman let out her breath. "I do. And I understand they pass their secrets along from one generation to. . ."

I did not wait to hear more. My face flaming I hurried from the shop, slamming the door behind me. I had several other errands in Lyleton, flour and tea to buy, a pair of shoes to leave at the cobbler, and now it seemed that all the shopkeepers looked upon me with a jaundiced eye. But I paid them no heed, holding my head high, my backbone stiff, though inside I seethed and boiled with anger.

A stop at the postoffice, however, simmered me down somewhat. There was a letter, at last, from Mr. Coombs, a sweet, rather concerned letter. His wife could find no one willing to work at Wuthersfield, but he hoped that I had in the meanwhile obtained someone closer to home. Was I happy? he wanted to know, in good health? I wondered if there had been something in my last letter which had made him think otherwise. I must write him at once, I thought, reassure him, for I could see no reason for burdening that kindly old man with my worries.

The evening star was brilliant in a pale lilac sky when I left the high road for the rutted lane which led to the house. The trees grew thick on either side and here night's dark shadows had

already come. The horse, sensing the stable and her food close at hand, quickened her pace. Suddenly ahead of me in the gloom I perceived a man on horseback, sitting motionless astride the lane. I thought it might be Richard or Arthur come to meet me and I shouted, "Hello there!"

The man did not answer but came cantering toward me, and before I could utter an astonished word, raised a stout stick and brought it down with a loud thwack on the horse's back. She reared, nearly spilling me from the gig. I clung to the reins, my heart lurching with fright, as she righted herself and began to race down the lane, rocking the clattering gig from side to side.

The horseman galloped alongside, masked, cloaked, silent, a faceless stranger, a black stain of moving horror in the gathering night. From the tail of my eye I saw him bend toward me. I heard the clack of the stick against steel. Suddenly the gig was rolling furiously, crazily along on one wheel.

My God, he was trying to upset the gig! He was trying to kill me!

In another moment the whole conveyance would overturn, crashing on its side, hauling me along helplessly trapped beneath. Desperate, I threw my weight sideways and the gig came back on two wheels. "Whoa! Sabina, whoa!" I shouted. "Whoa there, girl!" I thought she slowed her pace, but even my voice could not stop her. She was too frightened.

And still the stranger rode beside me. I trans-

ferred the reins to one hand and with the other felt for the whip at the gig's side. My hand touched it just as I heard the rickety-rack-rack of the stick in the wheel again. The gig teetered, wagged, righted itself, wagged.

I brought the whip round and struck blindly again and again at the figure on horseback, struck with a fury born of horror and panic and the ultimate angry, sheer, basic will to live. He warded off the blows with his club and for a half minute we fought a weird duel, he and I, fought until the horse and gig emerged from the tree darkened lane into the yard patterned with diamond shaped lights from the windows of Wuthersfield.

I gave my attention then to halting the horse before she slammed through the stable wall. When I had finally got her stopped, her eyes still rolling wildly, I looked around.

The horseman was gone.

It was then, and only then a fleeting picture, an impression, a flashing memory came to me. When the horseman had raised his arm to strike with his club, a stray chink of light had caught the upper part of his cloak and I glimpsed a gold braided fastener at the throat and a portion of scarlet lining. It was a military cloak the stranger had worn.

Richard, I remembered, had one exactly like it.

CHAPTER IX

I unhitched the gig with trembled hands and brought Sabina inside the stable where I rubbed her sweating flanks down. Then I threw her an armful of hay and as I did so I noticed that Richard's horse was gone from its stall.

Could I have been mistaken about the cloak? No, not about the cloak—No, I was sure of that gold braided frog, the red lining.

I went back out into the yard thinking that because my assailant had worn a military cloak did not necessarily mean he was Richard. There must be scores of those cloaks, scores and scores of them.

I got my packages from the floor of the gig where they had spilled in our mad race. Several

were missing, fallen, I guessed in the lane. But nothing in the world could induce me to return there before daylight.

With my arms full I began to walk across the yard to the back of the house, my mind going round and round. Who? I thought again of the possibility of one of Richard's friends hiding in the house. I paused, looking up at the ivied walls, a dark green thicket rising silently to the star flecked skies, shielding its secrets within. "Who is there? *Is* someone there?" I wanted to shout.

The wind rustled, a night bird cried. The shuttered windows stared down at me with blank faces. Perhaps there really was no one.

I came to the kitchen door where Arthur's horse, hitched to a post, was cropping the grass. The old nag raised her head and I patted her velvet nose. She felt warm to the touch, and suddenly I thought "Could it have been Arthur?" The horse was large, raw boned and in the dark of the lane I had paid more heed to the rider than to his mount. And the cloak. Arthur had once been in the Army, I remembered Thomasin telling me, and he probably owned a military cloak too.

Inside Thomasin was drinking tea at the table, and Arthur, seated in a chair by the fire, was cracking walnuts. At the sink, Rosie, on a step stool, was peeling potatoes. A lovely tableau, a tranquil, domestic scene, cozy, warm, in such sharp contrast to the tumultuous experience of ten minutes ago, I wondered briefly if that horrible brush with the cloaked rider had

been real.

Arthur said, "Oh, there you are. We were wondering." He was wearing his hunting jacket with leather patches at the elbows.

"You've been out?" I asked.

He looked at me, slightly puzzled. "Yes—a while ago."

"How long have you been home?" I wanted to know.

Thomasin's cup clattered in the saucer. "Good God!" she exclaimed. "What on earth has happened to you?"

Until that moment I was unaware of my hat knocked askew and my hair coming down round my neck. "Someone tried to upset the gig," I said.

Thomasin got to her feet. "Are you all right?"

"Quite." I told them how I had been waylaid by a man on horseback.

Thomasin said, "Is *that* why you asked Arthur how long he had been at home?"

"Why . . . I wondered if perhaps he had seen anyone. . . ."

"Or if it had been *him*?" That wretched smile was on her face, but I knew she was angry.

"No," I said, backing off.

"But you thought it. Yes, I can see by your face, you did. And would you please tell me why in heaven's name Arthur would want to attack you, knock the gig over?"

"Yes," Arthur echoed.

They were right, of course, why should Arthur want to harm me? Though I never had

considered Richard's cousin and his wife as bosom friends, probably never would, we had accommodated ourselves to one another quite pleasantly. Not once had there been an argument between us, not even a cross word.

"I am sorry if I gave the wrong impression," I apologized.

"Perhaps it was a highwayman," Arthur ventured. "They say that many of the farmers are getting desperate."

"Perhaps," I said. But I did not think so. A highwayman would have stopped the horse, stuck a pistol in my ribs, and said, "Your money or your life." Why should he upset the gig, and so close to the house?

"You ought not to be out after dark," Thomasin was saying.

"It got later than I thought," I said. "And . . . I had not planned on being ambushed."

"Yes, of course. I *am* sorry, Zillah." Her mouth stretched into a thin smile. "I am not saying the right things, am I? Why don't you go upstairs and tidy up and I'll fix you a hot cup of tea?"

"I will. And . . . oh, by the way," casually, "is Richard at home?"

"No, he went out about an hour ago. Said he would be back in time for dinner."

Once upstairs I crossed directly to the cupboard where Richard kept his clothes. I pawed through the lot quickly, then again more slowly. To make sure I examined each garment a third time, searching the innermost corners of the

cupboard and the floor too.

His cloak was missing.

I sat down on the bed, my heart fluttering strangely. I must not condemn him out of hand, I told myself. Simply because he left the house wearing his cloak did not mean he had accosted me in the lane. He had gone out—that was all—most likely stopping at the *Yoke and Ox*. He did that frequently now that his friends were gone. Perhaps he was still there. And anyway why should he want. . . ? But I could not ask myself that question. Not of Richard.

I went to the mirror and removed my hat. I began to take the pins from my hair. It fell in dark cascades over my shoulders. "Like rivers of night," Richard had once said. When was that? In Paris, yes in Paris, when he was still my ardent lover. And what had changed him? Money, I thought, money. He had lost my dowry and he wanted more, a loan, he called it, from Grandmama's legacy, to go searching for Spanish treasure. And I had refused him. "I find it distasteful to beg from a woman," he had said.

Ah—but if I died. . .

No, I thought, my eyes in the mirror burning back at me. No!

Yet wasn't it true? Wasn't it? Wasn't it? If I should die Richard would not have to beg anymore. The money would be his, all of it, down to the last penny.

I turned from my image, hating myself, shaking my head, as if to dislodge the terrible thoughts from my brain. But they wouldn't go;

they kept swarming, buzzing about my ears like bees.

And with those thoughts came remembered scenes—Richard appearing suddenly in Miss Young's parlor, his face flushed, and later taking my arm as we walked down the tree lined street. Richard saying, "I'm not good at this . . . hang it all . . . will you marry me?" He had asked me to marry him. After Grand-mama had died. Not before. After.

But how had he known I had been left money?

Augusta could have written to him. And Richard who "hadn't a sou" had come round at once to the school, had gone through that stumbling, stammering farce, "I love you. . ."

Oh, God, was it possible?

I snatched my brush and began to tug at my hair. Money, I thought again bitterly, money. Richard playing at cards night after night, his one eye lit with a strange fire, the bronze curls clustering damply on his handsome forehead. I imagined him carelessly tossing a pound note into the pot, saying, "There's more, much more where this comes from. I have a rich wife." And everybody laughing.

I went on brushing my hair, pulling at the tangles, impatiently, savagely.

Why, Richard, why?

The Hangman. The noose swaying slowly to and fro, to and fro. "It's all nonsense . . . your imagination." And the steep, dark deadly gallery stairs. The yarn stretched across the staircase. Oh, how much better to rid oneself of a

wife than to come on your knees, pleading for money she might not give you.

I had been taken in, duped, like any silly kitchen maid, seduced by a pair of broad shoulders, a pirate's patch and a hearty laugh. I had never questioned his past, his gambling, his rapid dissipation of an inheritance. "Yes," I had said, all romantic and starry eyed, "yes, yes . . . I'll marry you."

Daft!

I hurled the brush at the door a moment before it opened. Richard came in, surprise stamped on his face.

"Where is your cloak?" I demanded, before he could utter a syllable.

"What cloak?" He was wearing a gray jacket, unbuttoned.

"The one with the gold braided frogs." I strode to the cupboard and flung it open. "It's not here. What have you done with it?"

"Done with what?" he asked, puzzled. "What are you talking about?"

"Your cloak," I repeated. "Where is it?"

He came up to the closet and searched clumsily through the clothes. "Well, I suppose you are right. It isn't there." He shrugged. "What of it?"

I eyed him coldly. "Hasn't Thomasin told you? I was attacked by a man wearing an army cloak this evening."

"She told me your story, but never mentioned a cloak."

"My *story*?" I exploded. "Is that what she called it?"

"Look here, Zillah, will you stay quiet for a moment?"

"No! I will not! Someone . . . someone on horseback wearing a cloak . . . *your* cloak . . . struck Sabina, and then tried to upset the gig."

"Where is the gig now?"

"Why—in the stable yard. I managed to fend him off with a whip."

"I see."

"You *see*?"

He didn't believe me! Incredibly, inconceivably, he didn't believe me! "Was it you?" I blurted out. "Just answer one question. Was it you?"

"My God, Zillah, I think you have taken leave of your senses."

A red mist formed before my eyes. "Don't pawn the whole episode off by calling me crazy!"

His eyebrows went up. "I'll never be able to understand women and their capacity for hysterics."

"Hysterics! My foot. It *was* you. You want to kill me. You have tried before . . . don't think I'm not on to you. You want me to die . . . so . . . so you can have my money."

His face hardened, shock giving way to cold disdain. We glared at each other for a long moment and then he turned and strode from the room.

I came down to dinner, my hair brushed and

pinned into place, wearing a fresh gown, my face a marble mask. This, I told myself, would be my last meal at Wuthersfield. In the morning I planned to pack my case, make polite good-byes and drive the gig into Lyleton in time to catch the early train. To stay at the house any longer would be madness, suicide.

Thomasin had cooked the meal. I can't remember what it was—pork, beef or fowl—since I don't think I tasted more than a forkful. The air between Richard and I was thick with unspoken words. However, Arthur, seemingly oblivious to the hovering pall, presently began an interminable account of some elusive pheasant he had been stalking that afternoon. Thomasin sat through the discourse, eating, wiping her lips daintily with a napkin from time to time, and smiling. Richard ate silently, steadily, his eye on his food.

"I expect you are not all that hungry," said Thomasin, looking in the direction of my plate. "Did you stop for tea at Mrs. Jarret's?"

"Yes," I lied. Mrs. Jarret had a bake and tea shop catty-corner from the chemist's where Thomasin and I had sometimes paused for refreshment. It was easier to let her think I had filled myself with the good woman's scones and sponge cake than trying to explain my lack of appetite.

"Well," said Thomasin, "I've made your favorite dessert. You can't refuse that. Rum trifle."

Thomasin, I had to admit, did make a very delicious trifle, a pudding of which both Rich-

ard and I were inordinately fond. Rosie removed the main course plates and Thomasin served her culinary masterpiece herself. But when she set it before me I could only stare at it, spoon in hand, stomach churning. I toyed with it a moment or two, then set the spoon down.

"Aren't you going to eat it?" Richard asked, eyeing my bowl. It disgusted me the way he had tucked in his meal, already gobbling up his portion of the pudding with such hearty gusto, apparently having forgotten our quarrel upstairs.

"No," I said, dryly, pushing the pudding across the table. "You can have it, if you like."

Thomasin jumped to her feet, reaching for the bowl. "There's no need for that, Richard," she said. "I have plenty more. Let me get you some."

"This is fine," Richard said, already spooning the trifle into his mouth.

"It isn't," said Thomasin firmly. She took the bowl from him, making a wry face. "Zillah's made a mess of it."

"Whatever you wish," Richard shrugged.

She brought him a fresh serving. "We aren't reduced to eating slops yet, are we?"

My stomach turned over. I excused myself and went directly up to my room. The door had a lock, but no key. Pulling a heavy chair over I moved it under the knob. Richard could sleep in the library or in the kitchen for all I cared. It was not only our quarrel, the bitter words exchanged, but what had caused it, the unanswered questions. What had happened to Rich-

ard's cloak? Had he tried to kill me? How could I trust him?

I got undressed and crawled into bed and lay there listening to the wind outside rustling and whispering in the ivy. Had I been too hasty? Would a man plotting murder eat so heartily as Richard had done without a qualm, without a sign of uneasy conscience? It was possible. But, on the other hand, perhaps I had taken a few circumstantial facts and blown them far out of proportion. Richard had wanted to borrow a thousand pounds, but did that mean he had tried to kill me?

I reached out and turned the lamp down. The shadows moved closer.

Yet—there was the man who had blocked my way in the lane. And what of the rope, the noose, and the black stretch of yarn? And Richard's missing cloak?

Still, my mind argued, I had not really given Richard a chance to explain, had I? Supposing he had been at the *Yoke and the Ox*. It would be a simple matter to go in and ask, "What time did Captain Cates leave yesterday afternoon?" The tavernkeeper might look at me oddly, the customers smirk (another wife making sure of an errant husband), but I would know then for certain whether Richard had been my assailant or whether it had been a stranger.

An hour later, still awake, I heard Richard's step in the corridor outside. The door knob rattled. An indrawn breath. "Zillah? What's this?"

I bit my lip and said nothing. How could I be sure?"

"Zillah. . ." He is voice sounded odd. "Zillah, let me in." He rattled the door knob again and the chair slid to the floor. Through half closed eyes I watched as he squeezed his bulk in, stepping over the chair. He went straight to the wash basin and stood bending over, staring at it. Suddenly he began to retch. It lasted perhaps a half minute during which a struggle went on within me as to whether I should go to his assistance or whether I should lay there pretending to be asleep and let him suffer it out alone.

When he lifted his head, I saw that his face was a sickly gray. Unable to contain myself, I sat up. "What is it?"

"I must have caught a chill," he said. "Either that or the hock I drank at the *Yoke and Ox*. I thought it was too vinegary."

"Did you have much to drink?"

"Too much," he said. "I started at four and never quit until half past six." He bent over and began to retch again.

Even as I sprang from bed and ran to him, one part of my mind noted that it had been a quarter to six when I had come into the kitchen. If Richard had spoken the truth—and he did not seem to be in any mood for dissemblance now—he could not have been in the lane.

"My legs," he said, as I held his head. "They feel so queer. All cramped."

I wiped his clammy forehead with a cloth.

"Come, let me help you into bed." I looked down and saw that his vomit was blood stained. Hock would not do that, no matter how much he had drunk, nor would an ordinary chill. His condition worried me, though I said nothing.

With his weight on my arm we crossed the room. He was trembling and he made no protest when I helped him undress and tucked him into bed like a child. This in itself increased my concern.

Grasping my hand, he said, "Zillah, I've been a beast to you. God, what wouldn't I have done to take those words back. But I didn't know how."

"I have said some terrible things too."

"Y . . . yes. . ." He grimaced in pain. "You didn't mean it when you said . . . Zillah, darling, you really did not think I would . . . would what is you said? *Kill you?*"

"No," I said, "no, I did not mean it."

"I should have listened to you, taken your words more seriously. About the man who tried to upset the gig." He paused while another spasm twitched across his face. "Probably a highwayman. I'll go to the constable myself first thing. . ."

"Yes," I said. "Yes."

His hold tightened and an intense, almost fierce light came into his eye. "You are not going to leave me, Zillah?"

"No," I said, trying not to flinch under his feverish gaze.

A cold sweat had broken out on his forehead again. "For all my card playing, my temper, ev-

everything . . . I do love you, Zillah." He looked so desperately ill and suddenly so helpless. "Don't ever leave me, my darling. I couldn't bear it."

"No," I said in a strangled voice, looking away. "I won't leave you."

Richard was ill throughout the night, sleeping intermittently between bouts of delirium and retching. He complained constantly of thirst, and I brought him pot after pot of tea laced with milk. Sometimes he had fantasies of sailing a Spanish galleon, the decks knee deep in golden doubloons. "It's for Zillah, for Zillah!" he would cry.

Once when he was awake and quite rational he said, "Do you know what it was that first made me love you? Not that beautiful hair or those wide soulful eyes, but the curve of your cheek." He smiled faintly as he traced my cheek with the tip of a shaking finger. "Why, you're not going to cry, Zillah, are you? It's just a recurring fever, one that I picked up in Africa. I'll be all right in the morning, you'll see."

But in the morning his condition had worsened. Though he had stopped vomiting, his skin was of a ghastly pallor, still clammy to the touch, and he could scarcely move his limbs. Thoroughly alarmed I sent Arthur to Lyleton for the doctor.

Two hours later he arrived, a portly man with the ruddy complexion one associates with rich foods and fine wines. Dr. Lovell confirmed Richard's own diagnosis and said that, indeed, Richard was suffering from tropical fever. Ma-

laria, he thought.

I knew a few things about malaria since Grandmama had as one of her customers the wife of a retired infantryman who had served in India and who was afflicted with the disease. His wife would consult with Grandmama from time to time and from her description of her husband's symptoms I knew that Richard's illness was not the same.

"He's had the chills," I told Dr. Lovell. "But there's been no fever, that I could tell."

"Ah, Mrs. Cates," he said, drawing out my name in a nasal twang. "I daresay you feel you have the power to cure your husband without my assistance?"

I reddened, embarrassed, but somewhat angry too. My witch's reputation had apparently reached his ears too. "If I felt so, Dr. Lovell," I replied stiffly, "I would have not asked my husband's cousin to fetch you."

Richard, from his pillow, said in a faint, debilitated voice, "She's quite right. I am beginning to think it is not the same."

"Hmmmm. . . ." Dr. Lovell fixed Richard with red veined eyes. "Well, my professional opinion was given and it stands. We shall see." He turned to me. "I've left some powders, one every other hour. And you must keep him warm. Soft food." He patted my arm in a patronizing fashion. "I am sure you will make an excellent nurse and the Captain will soon recover. If you have any difficulties feel free to send for me."

He went out with Thomasin. "You will stay

for a glass of port, doctor?" I heard her ask. He accepted the invitation and later when I went down to the kitchen to get some tea for Richard, I heard his loud voice booming in the library. Perhaps, I thought, Thomasin, deciding to kill two birds with one stone, has sought advice for her headaches.

For the next week, with Rosie's help, I tended Richard faithfully, fixing broths and custards, fetching and carrying, bathing and shaving him, sometimes anticipating his every wish. When he was somewhat better and could sit up my anxious, at-the-ready air became a source of amusement to him. "Ah," he teased me on one occasion, "how you jump at my call. A guilty conscience, my love?" He grabbed my skirt and pulling me down to the bed, hooked his arm about my waist. "Oh, you're blushing. I'm right. You thought . . . what was it? . . . I was a highwayman?"

It was on the tip of my tongue to tell him that when he had first become ill he had believed my story of an assailant, promising to go to the constable. Apparently he had forgotten and I had no wish to bring the matter up, fearing that we might have words over it again. Later, I thought, later when he is well we would thrash the whole thing out.

He drew me closer. "So I wanted to kill you for your money, hmmm?"

"Please . . . Richard," I pleaded, trying to struggle free.

He cupped his hand under my chin and brought my face round to where he could look

into my eyes. "Confess, now. You said all those ugly words because you were angry at me."

"Yes," I said, kissing him. "That is the way it was."

He drew me close, sighing, "Ahhhhh. . ."
And fell asleep holding me.

Richard's recovery seemed very slow and to hasten it I resorted to several herbs which I remembered from my days with Grandmama, five leaf grass, cow parsley and mugwort, all of which had strengthening properties. Richard laughed when I would fix them in his tea, but all the same he never refused my offerings.

A fortnight had passed since Richard first took ill. He was much improved, leaving his bed now for longer and longer periods, chafing at me for still watching him closely. "I've had enough of that pap you've been feeding me," he said one night. "I'm coming down to dinner and I want a *meal*—roast beef, rare, the way I like it, Yorkshire pudding. . . ." And he proceeded to rattle off a menu which would have made a trencherman quail.

"Tomorrow night, then. I promise."

We had been having our meals together in the bedroom. I prepared them myself in the kitchen and brought them up on a tray. So that Richard would not be tempted to stray from his diet I always ate the same food as he, with one exception. At our evening meal I allowed Richard a glass of wine in place of the ubiquitous tea.

"Bother," he said, when I had brought the tray up that night. "I forgot to ask if you

wouldn't bring along another cup for me too. It's blowing cold in here tonight and I could do with some hot tea."

"Here take mine," And as he began to protest, "No, I can have my tea later." I filled the cup from the pot.

"Thank you, my love." He brought the tea to his lips and drank. "Bitter." He held out his cup. "Give me another spoonful of sugar?"

He drained the cup and setting it down began at once to cut into his egg toast. We had almost finished our meal when I realized that Richard had eaten very little and had become strangely silent.

"What is it?" I asked. "Are you not feeling well?"

"No," he said. "No. There's a burning in my throat. I feel just as I did. . ." He eased himself out from under the tray and stumbled to his feet. Before he reached the basin, he had lost his meal.

Richard became worse and worse that night, infinitely worse than he had been with his first attack. I had Arthur saddle up Sabina and ride as quickly as possible for Dr. Lovell.

A storm had been brewing since midnight and I prayed that it would hold off until Arthur returned with the doctor. But it broke a half hour after Arthur left and when Dr. Lovell arrived some two hours later, Richard, my Richard, was gone.

CHAPTER X

I was sitting on the edge of the bed, holding Richard's cold hand, sitting there stricken dumb when I heard them enter the room.

Dr. Lovell came over to the bed, peered down at Richard for a moment, then closed his eye. "He's dead," he said in his pompous way.

I looked up at him, the high colored, loose jowled face, and suddenly I had the insane desire to strike him. For while the word "dead" had been unspoken, I did not have to believe it. How could I? It was not Richard's fate to die so young, like this. If I had been told he had perished in battle from a bullet, or died trampled by enemy cavalry, or cruelly knifed in a duel I might have been able to accept his mor-

talities. But here, this way, crumpled, sickened, like an old woman, expiring with a pitiful groan? Richard?

"Come away," Thomasin said. Her face was a muddy gray as she took my arm. "Dr. Lovell wants to examine Richard."

"No," I said, still clinging to Richard's hand, "no."

"Be sensible, my dear Mrs. Cates." The doctor folded plump hands over a waistcoated belly. "How can I sign the death certificate unless I examine your husband?"

"No. . . !" I shouted at him, shrugging Thomasin's hand from my arm.

"Hysterics, my dear, tsk, tsk. You must accept the Lord's will."

"No!"

"Well, well then, perhaps a sedative." He put his hand on my shoulder.

"No!" I half rose and began to beat at him with one hand, the other still holding on to Richard.

"She's crazy," I heard Arthur say.

The next instant he had brushed Dr. Lovell aside and, roughly freeing my hand from Richard's, lifted me bodily from the side of the bed, setting me on my feet. Blindly, through tear enraging eyes, I struck at him, felt the mark of his teeth on the palm of my hand, saw the dark pupils of his eyes enlarge. He raised his large paw and gave me a stunning blow across the face. Thomasin caught me as I staggered back.

In the shocked silence which followed, Dr. Lovell's voice dropped like a stone. "Why the

man's been poisoned! Arsenic, I believe."

I opened my eyes and saw Thomasin looking down at me. The calmness of her gaze, the silence of the house in the wake of my remembered madness seemed strange. Where was I? What had they done with Richard?

"I brought you to my room," Thomasin said. "Are you all right?"

"Yes. . . ." I sat up. "I . . . I have been unconscious for long?"

"No, not very." She smiled. I noticed the grayness had gone out of her face and her natural color had come back. "Dr. Lovell wants you to have a sedative."

"I don't need it."

"Zillah. . . ."

"No, Thomasin. I'm quite all right now," I said firmly. My mind skirted the knowledge of Richard's death like a cat skimming a narrow path on the edge of an abyss. "Truly. And I promise to behave." Later, in my own time, when I was alone I could allow myself to give way to sorrow.

"Very well," she said. "Dr. Lovell wishes to speak to you. Do you think you are able?"

"Yes . . . yes. He is still here? What did he mean by saying Richard. . . ?" But she had already gone out the door.

A few minutes later Dr. Lovell came in, rubbing his hands. "Well, well, my dear. So you've come round. I am afraid I gave you a terrible shock. An unnecessary one, too, as it turns out.

And I do apologize.”

“Unnecessary? But you said. . .”

“I know, my dear. At first glance it seemed that Captain Cates’ appearance—the clammy skin, stiff limbs and so on—was indicative of poisoning, arsenic poisoning. I’ve had a few cases of such inadvertent poisoning now and again. But on closer examination I found that your husband, weakened by malaria, succumbed from heart failure brought on by acute gastritis.” He paused for a moment, his thumbs hooked in the pockets of his waistcoat, rocking back and forth on his heels.

I wondered just how competent Dr. Lovell was. His original diagnosis of Richard’s illness, I still felt, had been incorrect. Was he mistaken about this too? There was no way I could tell. I was not a physician, not trained in the medical profession. What I knew of poisons was limited to herbal lore—which plants to avoid and which antidotes to use in case they were mistakenly swallowed. We once had a nanny goat who had strayed into a patch of deadly nightshade and had subsequently died. When found she was on her side, her legs rigid, the pupils of her eyes rolled out of sight. But what a man looked like after poisoning I did not know.

“You are quite certain, then, Dr. Lovell?” I asked.

“Quite certain, my dear. Now, now, you mustn’t worry about it. Captain Cates was not the kind to take his own life, was he?”

“He would never do that.”

“And there seems to be no reason why a man

living in the bosom of his family, beloved by you all, should be poisoned, does there?"

"No, no reason." I forced myself to look straight into his eyes, for a sudden terrible thought had come to me. There was a time, not too long ago, when *I* had been angry enough to kill Richard. But only metaphorically speaking. A flareup of temper, my suspicions of him, his obstinate refusal to take my terrifying experience in the lane seriously, his sitting there afterwards calmly in the face of my emotional turmoil, tucking in a hearty dinner. And that second helping of trifle! Maddening beyond belief. But I knew for certain that I could no more have poisoned Richard or harmed him in any way than I could have harmed myself.

". . . heart failure. And you have my sincerest sympathy," Dr. Lovell was saying. "A most untimely and tragic death."

"Yes," I said, "yes," gripping the bedclothes as a blurred mist rose before my eyes. Untimely. And I had not been able to bring myself to part with a thousand pounds. He had yearned so to go sailing for sunken treasure, Spanish galleons filled with golden doubloons, so that he could bring them to me and say, "See, I don't need your money." A thousand pounds. And now he was dead. God, I thought, and felt the hot, salty tears coursing down my face, how could I live with myself?

"We will leave you, my dear." It was Thomasin. "Don't fret. I shall take care of things."

Things? I heard the door shut. Yes, things. The laying out, the funeral. Richard was dead. I

broke down then and cried in earnest.

The next day I sent two letters off with news of Richard's death, one to Mr. Coombs and one to Augusta in Dijon, France. From Augusta's last communication I gathered she and her family were staying there just a short while and then moving on to Italy. Perhaps my letter would be forwarded. I did not know where to reach Malcolm, so I had asked Mr. Coombs to contact him. I also felt (no matter what my personal prejudices were) that the men who had stayed at Wuthersfield should be apprised of their Captain's passing. However, I hadn't the vaguest idea of where they had gone to, though I went through all of Richard's personal papers to see if I could find an address.

It was while examining these papers I came upon a letter dated prior to our marriage, a letter never finished; never sent. I shall never forget that letter nor be rid of the guilty scar it left on my conscience.

"Dear Zillah," it read, "I don't know yet whether I will have the courage to mail this. I have tried to stay away but cannot. I love you. I love you and I want to marry you. But I do not know if you will have me after the shameful way I have behaved toward you. More than that I have no money, no prospects. Are you willing to marry a poor man? I tell myself that this will not matter, that you have always lived with limited funds and because the both of us are poor, we will be equals. But perhaps I pre-

sume. Oh, Zillah, I am not very good at phrasing a love letter. I don't know. . . ."

And there Richard had broken off. But it was enough. He had told me as surely as if he had returned to life that he had not known of Grandmama's legacy, that he had loved me and wanted me as his wife.

Richard was buried in the family plot at Lyleton, a hoary, moss covered, weed choked cemetery. It was a simple ceremony attended by the doctor, Thomasin, Arthur, myself and little Rosie weeping in the background. When the last clump of earth had been tamped down on the gravesite, I looked up and to my astonishment saw Colby. He was dressed in an army uniform, somewhat well worn but newly pressed and neat. He was clean shaven, his hair combed, parted precisely down the middle and looked so sober it took me a moment or two before I recognized him. After the pastor departed he came up and spoke to me.

"I heard 'bout the Captain goin'," he said, hat in hand. "I thought I'd pay my respects."

"How did you hear?" I asked, eyeing him suspiciously from behind the draped, black veiling of my hat.

"The man who delivers ale to the *Yoke and Ox* delivers to the *Pendulum* too. He brought the news.

"*The Pendulum?*"

"It's a pub in Barrow's End," he said.

Barrow's End was a small hamlet some five

miles east of Lyleton.

"You have been there all this while?"

"Yes, m'am. I been workin' for a friend helpin' him out at the Pendulum."

"And the others?"

"They'll be in London, m'am. They went straight up after . . . after. . ." He fumbled with his hat. "I meant to tell you we was sorry for the way we behaved, but cards is like drink, and. . ."

Another surprise. Colby apologizing. "They've never come back?" I asked.

"No, m'am." He looked puzzled. "They was ashamed, winnin' all that money. But all's fair in love and war as the Captain himself would say."

"Yes . . . of course. He was a fair man."

"He was that." He brushed what seemed suspiciously like a tear from his eyes. "We all loved him. And, m'am, I hope you have no hard feelin's."

"I . . . no, not now." There were questions which burned on my tongue, but I did not know how to ask them. Have you tried to kill me, Colby? Was it you who waited in the lane one dark evening wearing a military cloak?

"Colby. . . ,"

I wet my lips. "Colby, remember that night I made quite a scene and threw that gray shroud on the card table?"

His Adam's apple bobbed and I sensed it was a memory he recalled with embarrassment, not for himself but for me. "Yes, m'am."

"Well, did any of you—as a joke, I mean—dress up to scare me? I'm not angry, you under-

stand," I added hastily. "I just wanted to know."

"No, m'am." He looked genuinely bewildered. "Why should we want to scare you?"

For that I no longer had an answer. It seemed that I had misjudged the men as well as Richard.

A few days after we buried Richard I received a letter from Mr. Coombs. He apologized for not being able to attend the funeral, not coming to Wuthersfield to comfort me in my time of sorrow. Mrs. Coombs was not well, "Nothing serious," he added, "just old age." He had written Malcolm in London as I had requested. "What are your plans?" he wanted to know. "You realize, my dear, you are always welcome here."

It seemed like a strange dream, one which would go on and on repeating itself; loved ones dying and Mr. Coombs asking, "What are your plans?"

I wrote and for want of anything better to say told Mr. Coombs I planned to go away, perhaps join Augusta and her family in Europe. In reality I had no desire to do so. I had no desire to do anything. It seemed rather pointless to plan a future, since the future meant so little. Within a year I had lost Grandmama and my husband, two deaths which had not only left me with a sense of loss but with a feeling of guilt too.

In the meanwhile to keep myself from sinking into utter despair I busied myself with household tasks. One afternoon, about a week or ten days after Richard's death, I decided to give my

bedroom a thorough cleaning. It had been set to rights by Rosie since that fateful night, but she had been burdened by so many other chores she had only done a superficial job.

I began with the floor, sweeping up great clouds of dust. The bed was too heavy to move, so I got down on my hands and knees with a hand brush. Peering under the sideboard into the shadowy forest of gray fluffed lint, I espied a cup. I brought it out. It looked like the same cup Richard had drunk from the night he took fatally ill. It must have been knocked over when he had hastily stumbled to his feet on the way to the wash basin, and then later kicked under the bed in my hysterical struggle with the doctor and Arthur. There were still some sticky dregs in the bottom and I sniffed at them. The odor was faintly familiar.

I sat back on my heels, holding the cup, my brow creased. I sniffed again—and it came to me. The familiar scent—weak though it was—was the same as the rat poison I had bought at the chemist's shop in Lyleton.

I rose slowly to my feet. A whole throng of thoughts, pictures, emotions rushed through my head, leaving me weak and trembling.

Dr. Lovell had been correct in his initial pronouncement. All doubts were swept away. In my hand was the final, irrevocable evidence.

Richard had been poisoned.

But, by whom? And why?

Perhaps he had also been poisoned the first time he became ill, the night we had our quarrel. A smaller dose, not enough to kill him. I

remembered how I had left the table, angry, and gone upstairs. I had shoved a chair under the knob and then climbed into bed. It couldn't have been more than an hour, maybe less, when Richard forced the door open. I recalled how he had doubled up with cramps, how he had retched, the ghastly, muddy look on his face. He must have been given the arsenic in something at dinner. But Arthur and Thomasin had partaken of the meal, and I, too, in a desultory fashion. None of us had suffered the slightest effects.

I closed my eyes, squeezing them tight, trying to recall every detail of the scene in the kitchen. Rosie had helped Thomasin dish up the food, carrying the tureen of soup to the table very carefully, her tongue stuck out between her teeth, smiling triumphantly as she placed it before Richard without spilling a drop.

Rosie?

That Rosie was fond of me, fanatically loyal, I had no doubt. But how she felt about Richard I did not really know. Perhaps she had overheard our quarrel, "You want to kill me . . . for my money!," and believing that Richard was a threat to me she had decided to remove him. Yet it was hard for me to see Rosie slipping poison into Richard's soup, hard, I suppose, because I could not picture Rosie, who had not a mean bone in her body, as a murderess.

And, anyway, I had no real proof that Richard had been poisoned at that dinner. But there was no uncertainty about his last meal. I had

the evidence in my hand; the teacup with the unmistakeable odor of arsenic. Someone had dropped a good dose of it in the teapot before I had brought it upstairs. Who had been in the kitchen that night? Rosie, Arthur and Thomasin, the same people who had been present at the dinner. In my mind I went through the whole process of gathering that meal again; poached fish, blancmange, a glass of ale. . . A glass of ale, a pot of tea.

It hit me then like a sudden blow on the head. *The tea had been meant for me!*

Yes, yes, of course. I began to pace excitedly up and down. *The tea had been meant for me.* No one in the kitchen knew, not even myself, that Richard would want a cup of tea. He did not drink it for dinner and before his illness had never drunk it at all.

Again my mind flitted back to the dinner in the kitchen. What was it at that meal which Richard ate and I did not? I snapped my fingers. The rum trifle! It was the only dish I had not even tasted. And he had eaten a portion of mine. Not all of it, I remembered. Perhaps *that* was why he had only become ill. If I had eaten it, as I was meant to, I would have been dead.

Richard had been killed by mistake.

I sat down again, cold, my knees shaking.

Rosie? Suppose she had lied to me about running away. Suppose her father had sent her back to Wuthersfield to kill "the witch."

No, that was improbable. Ridiculous. Even if Rosie's father's mind had become so crazed

with trouble and worry, Rosie would have been a poor instrument for any such plot. She was too honest, too forthright, too uncomplicated in her mind. Fraud, pretense was as foreign to her as French brandy. And besides, the thought came to me, what of the other attempts on my life, The Hangman, the yarn stretched across the stairway? Those encounters had occurred before my reputation as a witch had gone the rounds, before Rosie had left Wuthersfield. I knew they were all connected, the ghostly appearances and the poison. Someone had been trying very hard, in devious, diverse ways, to kill me. But it was not Rosie. Richard and his friends I had already ruled out.

That narrowed it down, narrowed it down to two people. Arthur or Thomasin. There was no one else.

A knock on the door brought me out of my thoughts with a start. "May I come in?" It was Thomasin.

When she came through the door I stared at her as if I were suddenly seeing her for the first time.

"What have we here?" she said, smiling at the cup in my hand. "Reading tea leaves?"

I looked down at the dried dregs at the bottom of the cup. "Perhaps I am," I said slowly. *The trifle. Both Arthur and Thomasin had eaten the trifle too.*

"And what do you see?" she asked tolerantly.

"I'm not quite sure." *But who had served it? Thomasin, I remembered. She was very proud of her trifle.*

"I'm afraid I don't take much stock in tea leaves," Thomasin said. "Or crystal gazing, or fortune telling in general, do you?"

"Sometimes," I said, still staring at the cup. *Thomasin had seemed rather put out with Richard because he was eating my pudding. She had snatched the bowl away and given him a new serving.*

"Well then, what do you see, my dear?" All smiles, she sat down on a chair opposite me.

"It's not the future that's here, it's the past. And I see a rum trifle."

She laughed. "Oh, come now, Zillah, if you have a hankering for rum trifle, you've only to ask."

"But this is a special rum trifle. Very special." I raised my eyes. "In addition to the rum and spongecake and whipping cream and macaroons there is a dash of rat poison. Arsenic to be exact."

She paled, her eyes narrowing like a night predator's when a sudden light has been thrust in its face. But the smile, oddly, remained; a dummy's smile, false, without meaning. "What are you trying to tell me?" she asked calmly.

"That I'm not fond of trifle dosed with rat poison. And neither was Richard. But unfortunately he did not know it was there, did he?"

She rose from her chair. "You are mad."

"Am I? The tea had it too. The tea *I* was supposed to drink."

"You are mad."

"Smell this," I said, pushing the cup under her nose.

"But Rosie. . ." She caught her lip between

her teeth.

"Rosie was supposed to have removed the tray, everything, do the washing up. But in her confusion and distress she did not realize the cup was missing. It had rolled under the bed. Of course she did not know the significance of that cup. She was just the scullery maid doing her work. A pity you have such an aversion to labor, Thomasin, because you knew and you would have taken care that nothing incriminating was ever found. Am I right?"

She said nothing.

"Am I right?" I persisted.

She gave me a long look, her yellow-brown eyes hard and unflinching. "Perfectly," she said. "I am only sorry it was Richard and not you."

CHAPTER XI

In the back of my mind there must have still lingered a small doubt as to Thomasin's guilt, for her confession coming as easily and quickly as it did stunned me.

It was Thomasin who broke the silence. "Now, if you will give me the cup. . ."

"No," I said, thrusting it behind me.

"Very well," she shrugged. "Keep it then."

I could hardly believe my ears. The woman's coolness was unreal. "You tried to kill me," I accused, my cheeks flaming. "Not only with poison but on the gallery stairs."

"No. I'm afraid I can't take credit for The Hangman. That was Arthur's bit."

Arthur's bit! As if he had been acting a role

in some play. But, of course, I could see now how easy it had been for Arthur. He had two staircases—one never used, one secret—leading to the gallery at his disposal. He could have slipped out of the card room any time he chose without being missed, since he rarely played with the men, or on the pretense of going hunting could have gone up to the peephole and kept watch for me.

“But why?” I asked. “Why do you want to kill me? What have I ever *done* to you or Arthur?”

She turned and started for the door. I ran before her, barring the way. “*You . . . !* This is incredible! You admit to murdering a man, trying to murder me . . . then you . . . you calmly walk away. Why? What have I done?”

“You have never *done* anything, Zillah. It’s just what you are.”

“What I am. What does that mean? Is it because you think me a witch?”

She curled her lip.

“What then?” It flashed through my mind that Thomasin might have been in love with Richard. She was older than he by fifteen years at least, but older women sometimes formed passionate attachments to younger men. And one could hardly blame her, comparing rabbit-toothed, bumbling Arthur to Richard. “Is it . . . was it because of Richard?”

“Richard?”

“Did you want to get rid of me so that you could have Richard?”

She laughed, a short, harsh laugh. “You are a

bigger ninny than I thought. Have Richard? I wouldn't squash a fly for that drunken braggart."

My face flushed. "You seemed fond enough of him when he was alive."

"Fond?" Her thin eyebrows went up. "Fond. In a way I suppose you are right. One doesn't bite the hand that feeds, as the saying goes, does one?"

"And you have no regrets?"

"I've already told you of my regrets. Now, if you will let me pass."

The gall of the woman! "You have just confessed to murder," I said, repeating myself, "and your only concern is that you killed the wrong person. The rest seems not to matter. You refuse even to give me any motive, any reason. . ."

She opened her mouth to speak when there was a rap on the door. "Thomasin?" Arthur's voice came through. "Are you there?"

I stepped aside and opened the door. "Come in, come in," I invited, "Mr. Hangman." His mouth fell ajar in frank amazement and his eyes went to Thomasin. "We have just been discussing a slight case of poison," I added. "Join us, won't you?"

He edged his way into the room. "Thomasin has confessed," I said. "She murdered Richard by mistake. I was to be the victim. But, of course, you know all about it."

Looking back I find it hard to understand why I was not frightened, why I remained so outwardly calm as I—alone in the room—faced

my two would-be executioners. Perhaps I was still too astonished. Perhaps I was too angry to feel fear.

"She found the cup," Thomasin said, talking past me. "She guessed."

"Oh. . ." He threw me a quick look, a nervous grin.

"Yes, I guessed," I said. "I guessed. You were the rider on horseback in the lane too, weren't you, Arthur?"

"Well. . ." His eyes rolled nervously toward Thomasin.

"And how clever you were," I went on. "Wearing Richard's cloak, then ducking back to the house before I arrived, sitting before the fire, very calmly cracking walnuts as I came through the door. Really, Arthur, you would do well on the London stage."

He grinned sheepishly. "Now, Zillah, it wasn't all that. . ."

Thomasin snapped, "Enough of this. Come along, Arthur, I need you in the kitchen."

"Dinner?" I sneered. "Don't forget the rat poison. But then you would not try *that* again, I suppose. In fact you won't try anything. I am going at once into Lyleton and inform Dr. Lovell."

"There's no need to go to Lyleton," Thomasin said coolly. "Dr. Lovell is to be our guest for dinner tonight. You can tell him then."

I stared at her as she opened the door and swished through, Arthur following in her wake. Did Thomasin think she could brazen it out? She would call me a liar, of course, deny every-

thing.

Still there was the cup. I went over to the bureau and opening a drawer, wrapped it carefully in a handkerchief, then hid it beneath a pile of underthings. My evidence, my proof. When Dr. Lovell came I would show it to him, explain that Richard had drunk from it, and he would see that his original diagnosis, death by poisoning, had been correct.

That part would be simple. But how could I prove that Thomasin had meant for me to die, that Arthur had tried to kill me previously? Not only would it be their word against mine, but I could not give Dr. Lovell any logical motive for their wanting to kill me.

I sat down on the window seat and looked out at the ruined garden strewn with autumnal leaves. In a sunny corner sheltered from the wind by a stone wall late purple and white asters still bloomed. I saw them, noted their color with my eyes as my mind ran questing down tortuous corridors of speculation. Why had Thomasin been so calm, so seemingly unperturbed? "Dr. Lovell . . . you can tell him," she had said.

Then suddenly I knew. I had the answer. It was so obvious, so blatantly obvious I wondered why it had not occurred to me before.

Richard's death by poison pointed directly to me!

Me! I was the one who had purchased the rat poison. The chemist was not likely to forget me, nor were the two customers who had come into the shop while he had wrapped the packet. All

of Lyleton, the entire neighborhood had probably been apprised of the fact that the "witch of the moors" had been to Mr. Trundle's for poison. And *I* was the one who had served Richard the last fatal cup of tea.

The motive? It would be simple for Arthur and Thomasin to tell the truth—Richard and I had been at odds, we had quarreled. He had lost a good bit at gambling, they would say, and I was angry, so angry I had killed him.

Ah yes, Thomasin could sit back and without lifting a finger watch me hang myself very neatly.

I got up from the window and gazed distractedly around the room. The broom and the dustpan were still leaning against the bed where I had put them before going down on my knees to look under the bed.

Suppose I said nothing about it?

No, I could not keep silent. I couldn't. It would be an act of cowardice and Richard's death would haunt me for the rest of my life. Perhaps, I thought, things were not quite that black. I could get Malcolm and Mr. Coombs to defend me. Rosie could testify that I had attended Richard faithfully in his illness, nursed him almost to the point of recovery. Would I have done so if I planned to kill him? Would they believe Rosie or me? The thought of standing in the defendant's box, the focus of so many hostile, curious eyes was repellent, but if it was the only way to prove my innocence and bring Thomasin and Arthur to justice, then I would

face the ordeal gladly.

I remained in my room until early evening when Rosie tapped on the door and asked if I were coming down.

"Is Dr. Lovell here?" I asked her.

"Yes, m'um. He arrived a few minutes ago. They're in the library havin' sherry."

Having sherry. The quicksilver thought ran through my mind that perhaps Thomasin was planning to poison the doctor and me at the same time, thus removing all danger to herself.

"What shall I say, m'um?" Rosie inquired.

Thomasin might dare to poison me—although it was unlikely she would do it in the doctor's presence—but she would never risk harming Dr. Lovell. He was too well known in Lyleton and his death or disappearance would raise questions no one would bother to ask about me.

"I'll be down directly," I said to Rosie.

Dinner that night was one of the oddest meals I had ever sat through. I suppose if I had been an objective on-looker, with all the facts in my possession, I might have found the proceedings somewhat amusing in a macabre way. Here was Mistress Thomasin, murderess, nodding to Rosie (got up in a rusty serving maid's uniform, unearthed, God knows from where) to remove our soup plates and Arthur butchering a joint of beef in an attempt to carve it, the doctor regaling us with local anecdotes; all very convivial. Not a mention of death, or poison, or murder, although the subject was uppermost in my mind and I'm not too sure it wasn't in Tho-

masin's and Arthur's too. But it wasn't amusing, not to me, and I was not an on-looker, but deeply involved and the dead man was the husband I intended to avenge.

We had come to the dessert and I was wondering how I might get Dr. Lovell alone for I certainly did not want Thomasin and Arthur to be present at our conversation, twisting my story to their convenience, when Dr. Lovell said to me, "I understand you have something to discuss with me."

"Yes," I said, surprised, "I do."

"Perhaps. . . , " he gave a slight nod to Thomasin, "the others will excuse us while we adjourn to the library?"

"Certainly," said Thomasin, "go right ahead. Arthur and I will join you later."

Thomasin's courteous acquiescence did not help the sudden nervous flutter in my stomach. I knew why she was being so kind, so agreeable. She was hoping I would incriminate myself.

The library fire had been replenished with a fresh log and Dr. Lovell went to the hearth directly, stretching his dimpled hands to the flames. "Looks as if there will be rain again," he said, a statement which he had made at least twice before. "Brings to mind the winter of '67, never stopped raining once. I was just a young assistant then, and old Barker who was my superior delegated all the nasty jobs to me. I remember being called out at three in the morning in a howling storm. . . ." He went on to tell me a long winded story about delivering a breech baby and I sat through hardly listening,

nervously twisting a scrap of handkerchief in my lap. How obtuse the man was, how infuriating. He was aware I had something of importance to discuss with him, had said so himself, yet here he was rambling on and on.

Finally, taking advantage of a momentary pause, I broke in: "I wanted to talk about my husband, about his death, Dr. Lovell."

"Why yes, mr dear. He was an excellent chap. I am reminded of my own nephew. . ."

"Dr. Lovell," I interrupted. "*Please.*" He looked rather startled, but I went on, "About Richard, you were right in the first instance. He was poisoned. He. . ." Dr. Lovell raised his hairless brows. "He . . . I found the cup he drank from, Dr. Lovell. It had rolled under the bed. It still has the tea dregs and they smell of rat poison. If you doubt me, I will go fetch it."

"There's no need, young lady." He lifted the tails of his coat so his backside could get the benefit of the fire. "I know about the poison."

I stared at him in utter astonishment. "You *know*?"

He nodded. "Yes, I had hoped we would not have to tell you. What with the shock of Captain Cates' death and all. . ."

"Tell me?" A small pulse began to beat in my throat. "Tell me what?"

"Why, that the poison was self administered. The poor man took his own life."

"Richard? But Dr. Lovell, you yourself said that he was not the sort of man to do such a thing. In the bedroom upstairs you said. . ."

"Yes, so I did, my dear. But only for your

protection." He came over and lowered himself on the sofa beside me. "You are a highly sensitive, excitable woman and I could not have you go into hysterics again. So . . . well, I'm afraid I distorted the truth a bit."

"But he *didn't* commit suicide. He was poisoned. He. . ."

"I am afraid everything points to his having done just that. His cousin-in-law, Mrs. Cates, told me how dejected he had become, losing everything he owned at cards, isn't that right?"

"Yes, but. . ."

"Including your dowry. Five hundred pounds?"

"Yes, but. . ."

"Brooded a lot. Spoke once or twice about taking his own life to Arthur Cates."

"He never. . ."

"Said that you, his wife, would be much better off without him. . ."

"*Dr. Lovell!*"

There was a stunned silence. His jowls quivered. "My dear, there is no need to shout," he said, offended.

"Please, forgive me. I won't shout. If you will only listen. Richard could not have possibly poisoned himself. I was there with him when he drank the tea. . ." There it was, I thought, now he has every right to accuse me of killing my husband.

"You watched him every moment?" Dr. Lovell asked. "Can you honestly swear you did not take your eyes from him for one tiny moment? That is all it would take, you know, one mo-

ment."

"I can't swear. No. But there is something else. The tea was meant for me. You see . . . at dinner Richard always had a glass of ale . . . but on that particular night, he asked for tea. . ."

"Which proves my point. Sugared and creamed, the poison would be more palatable in tea than ale."

How exasperating! I wanted to shake the man until his face jiggled and his teeth rattled. "Dr. Lovell," I tried again. "Thomasin has confessed she murdered Richard by mistake." There it was—laid out in cold, plain words even Dr. Lovell could not misinterpret.

"My dear," he said, soothingly, "now, now, my dear. . ."

"She admitted it to me, quite candidly, not a few hours ago. And Arthur. . ."

He raised his hand. "I know all about it from Mrs. Cates. She informed me you had these illusions. . ."

"Illusions. . . ?" My heart sank. I might have guessed how well Thomasin had primed the doctor. Still I went doggedly ahead: "They both have tried to kill me. From the time I first came to Wuthersfield, they have plotted to kill me."

"Now, now, my dear. You are not well. You have had a great shock, a loss, it has somehow disturbed your—shall we say, equilibrium?" His voice was bloated with professionalism. "I understand you have seen a ghost or ghosts, also, hmmm? I daresay most physicians would

humor you in these fancies. But I find it far more effective, especially in the case of a persecution complex, to point out to the patient the fallacies of his or her argument. I know you feel put upon, but it is only in your mind. Your late husband's relatives love and cherish you. They are quite concerned. Patience, I tell them. Time takes care of these things, time and. . ."

Time. His voice droned on and on about time while futility and frustration and sheer rage coiled tighter and tighter inside me until I wanted to scream. Was he really such a muddle headed fool, swallowing Thomasin's version of Richards' death without question? Or had the woman bribed him with good wine and good food? I could picture her saying, "Come now, my good doctor. Let us be intelligent about this. It was obviously suicide and the girl is high strung. More wine, doctor? We have some excellent vintages here at Wuthersfield, a well stocked cellar, isn't that so, Arthur? And, of course, doctor, it is always at your disposal." And the doctor sipping at his glass, smacking his lips, nodding.

"Perhaps you ought to go away for a while," Dr. Lovell was saying, "visit old friends. . ."

But why had Thomasin done it? Why had she gone to such elaborate lengths to make Richard's death seem like suicide? Why didn't she point the finger at me? Had second thoughts made her give up the idea of disposing of me? A guilty conscience?

"Dr. Lovell," I said in an even tone, choosing my words with care. "Did you sign the death

certificate as a suicide?"

"No, my dear. It would have raised all sorts of unpleasantries, a scandal, grist for the gossip mill, the pastor's refusing to bury the Captain in hallowed ground, and a taint on you, too, a young girl widowed by the unnatural death of her husband." He shook his head. "It wouldn't have done."

"And you are not disturbed by having your name put to a false death certificate?"

"I am not the first who has protected a family from the shame of suicide."

I made one last desperate effort. Still keeping my voice level I faced him, looking into his moist, red veined eyes. "Dr. Lovell. I am not hysterical, I am not imagining things. My husband was killed and my life may very well be in danger."

He shifted his gaze, a look of acute, painful embarrassment on his face. "Now, my dear, a sedative, some rest. . ." He got to his feet.

The next moment the door opened and Thomasin came in bearing a tray with glasses and two bottles of ruby red port. Behind her was Arthur, like a bulky, looming shadow. "I thought your chat lasted long enough," Thomasin said pleasantly, smiling, "and you might be thirsty."

"Indeed I am," said Dr. Lovell, a look of relief on his florid features. "You have such excellent port here at Wuthersfield."

My guess had not been far off the mark then. It was the port. How many bottles had Thomasin promised him? And from *my* wine cellar.

But the port was the least of my concerns. I was certainly not going to let the matter rest with the bland assumption on Dr. Lovell's part that Richard had taken his own life and that I was out of my head.

When the last drop of port had been drunk and Dr. Lovell, with a parting gift of two more bottles tucked under his arm, was sped on his way, I confronted Thomasin.

"You needn't think I shall keep silent about this," I said.

"What do you propose to do?" she asked with a sneer.

"I shall see the magistrate or constable or whoever represents the law in Lyleton and lay the facts bare."

"What facts?"

"Certainly not the ones you told Dr. Lovell. Or did you concoct the story between you?"

Arthur shuffled his feet. "You should never have admitted it, Thomasin."

She shrugged her shoulders. "I can't see that it makes any difference, since she won't ever get to Lyleton."

Even then, fool that I was, I did not realize the full degree of my danger. I burst out, "You cannot stop me!"

"Oh, listen to the ninny. 'You cannot stop me,' " she mimicked.

Rage, the stored up frustration which had been sputtering inside me for the past hour, exploded like a bomb. I struck Thomasin full across her foxy, hateful face.

Her eyes slitted, the red finger marks growing

vivid on her pale face, as Arthur grabbed my arms and wrenching them painfully, pinioned them behind my back. "Is that the way to behave toward your elders?" he asked. "And your dear aunt, too."

"Aunt? She is no aunt of mine."

"Indeed I am." Thomasin's smile was cruel. "Can you guess what my maiden name was? No? It was Beckwith."

They were taunting me. "I don't believe you."

"Yes, it was Beckwith. My older sister was Winifred, your mother, I believe."

I stared at her, thoughts, questions, uncertainties revolving like pinwheels in my head. *You haven't done anything. It's what you are.* What was I? My mother I had never known, never seen. And this woman, this Thomasin her *sister*? "I am your niece?" incredulous, unbelieving.

"Yes. You are my niece."

"But why . . . why should you hate me so?"

"Quite simple. *You*," she jabbed her finger at my collar bone, "you, Zillah, witch, bitch, whatever they call you, stand in my way."

"What way?" My confusion and my terror growing.

"In the way of my rightful inheritance. And for that you are going to die."

CHAPTER XII

She stood facing me, her pupils enlarged with hate, a bubble of angry froth at the corner of her mouth.

"You mean Wuthersfield?" I asked, still stunned, still bewildered. Since the house was not entailed it had come to me on Richard's death. Arthur was next in line to inherit.

"Wuthersfield!" she exclaimed in disgust. "This ruin? It would cost a fortune to make it liveable and as for selling it, old houses are a drug on the market. I mean an *inheritance* from my side of the family."

"And mine? But my mother and father died without leaving me a penny. My mother had nothing."

"Had she, now?" she said with the resolute voice of one very sure of her facts. "Are you certain?"

In the dark recesses of my mind a little doubt, like a pallid worm, raised its wavering head. *Was I certain?* How much did I really know about my mother? Nothing, except her name and that she was dead. Grandmama had evaded the few questions I had asked about her quite skillfully and Mrs. Coombs, the one time I inquired, had gossiped about the Beckwiths without telling me anything. It was possible, quite possible.

"If you are my aunt," I said, "then why did you not tell me of it sooner?"

"There is no 'if.' I *am* Winifred Beckwith's sister, and isn't it obvious why I did not want you to know?" She walked over to the sofa and sat down, folding her hands in her lap.

"But . . . Richard . . . he never said. . ."

"He did not know. My name before I married Arthur was Mrs. Ryecroft."

Mrs. Ryecroft, of course. She had been a widow.

And how could I dispute her claim? I took after my grandmother so completely, dark hair, dark eyes. I did not know what my mother had looked like; no portrait, no engraving, no photograph had come to me, so I could not even compare her face to Thomasin's. My mother had always been a vague shadow, her features blank. Suddenly an illogical resentment against her seized me. Why hadn't she prepared me for this? Why hadn't she left me something, any-

thing, but this awful mystery, this woman who threatened my life because of an inheritance I knew nothing about?

"You must be confused," I said. "My inheritance came from my paternal grandmother, not my mother."

"No one told you that you are the principal legatee in my father's estate?"

"No . . . no. . ." Mr. Coombs had had a falling out with the Squire, the last years of his life, I remembered Mrs. Coombs telling me, and Grandmama, having cut herself off from the people in and around Byrnne, knew little of their affairs. So who was to tell me?

"I daresay the executor thought there was time enough," Thomasin said.

"Are you certain about this inheritance?" I asked again.

"Would I risk poison if I were not?" she countered sarcastically. "I am certain. It is a bitter certainty I have lived with these many years; Papa leaving the bulk of his money to Winifred. His favorite, his pet. Oh, she wasn't his favorite when she ran off and married that drunkard, your father. Papa had very little to say for her *then*. I became his little lamb. Everything, all he owned, was going to be mine someday. But he died before he could change his will."

"I . . . I had no idea," I said.

". . . and you, you misbegotten witch, are to inherit that fortune, for so the will provides in case of Winifred's death. On your twenty first birthday." Her eyes glittered in the lamplight.

"But . . . but how did you know who I

was . . . who my mother was?" I could not recall ever having mentioned my mother's name to her, or for that matter, to Richard.

"I've known of you and your whereabouts for years," she said.

"You knew . . . about *me*?"

"For years," she repeated. "Since the day you were born, as a matter of fact. I was married then to my first husband and when your mother died I went to your father and offered to take you off his hands."

My skin crawled. The coldblooded malignity of her mind. She would have taken me then, an infant, and killed me, as one might carelessly step on and stub out an insect.

"But he refused. . ."

My father, my drunken father who had died in a tavern brawl, who, if I ever thought of him, did so with shame, must have sensed the evil in this woman, must have loved me enough to refuse her offer. It would have been easy for him to hand me over to the first pair of willing hands, but he had brought me to Grandmama instead. A sick lump formed in my throat.

"I would often think of you," Thomasin went on, "living out there alone with your grandmother, thought of it so often that. . . Well, never mind."

"Thought of what?" I went over to the sofa and stood staring down at her, a hard suspicion growing in my mind. "What did you think about, Thomasin?"

"I said, never mind."

"Did you hire someone perhaps to set fire to

my grandmother's cottage, or did you send this oaf. . . ?”

“Here, here,” Arthur said.

“You sent Arthur. He killed my grandmother!” The look on her face told me I had guessed correctly. “You *killed* her!” And for the moment I forgot everything, all but the nightmare in which I had seen my grandmother's horror-stricken face amid the flames, and Thomasin before me, unruffled, uncaring. A sudden rage distorted my vision and I struck at Thomasin again. She ducked her head as Arthur grabbed hold of my wrists. “She devil,” his hot breath whispered in my ear.

“You killed her! You killed her!”

Thomasin smiled. “Needlessly, as it turned out. I could hardly credit my luck when I heard Richard was marrying you and bringing you to Wuthersfield. It was easy to get Arthur to have us invited for an extended stay.”

“Easy!” I cried. “It was easy, was it? But I doubt if I had died instead of Richard you would be sitting here now, telling *him* how easy it was.”

“Dr. Lovell could have been persuaded to see it my way.”

“Persuaded?” I wanted to tear those foxy eyes out. But instinct cautioned me to control my rage. With an effort, clutching the sides of my skirts as if to give me balance, I went on in a calmer tone. “How should you have persuaded him? With a few bottles of port?”

Thomasin did not answer. Arthur spoke up. “Six hundred pounds,” he said. “Can you fancy

that? She promised him six hundred pounds when she could have had him for three hundred."

"Hold your tongue!" Thomasin snapped.

Arthur grumbled something I did not catch.

"That's a good sum of money," I said. "My mother's legacy must be quite large."

"Quite."

"And murder will not press on your conscience? My grandmother's, Richard's, and, as you say, mine?"

"Conscience?" She turned the word over on her tongue with distaste. "My dear there is nothing like the deadly pall of genteel poverty, no *penury*, that is more apt a word, I think, to smother the most raging conscience. I have lived with mended petticoats and hand-me-down dresses, stuffy, little places smelling of cooked cabbage, sharp nosed, mealy mouthed, dunning tradesmen too long. My conscience died, I think, finally and completely when we paid our first visit to a great aunt, a well-to-do old lady, tight fisted, mean beyond belief. She treated me like a slave and I would have murdered *her*, but for the fact all her money was going to a school for wayward girls and not one farthing to me. No, I'm done with conscience. I leave that to the stupid and to the very rich. Why should I go on smiling and curtsying and licking people's boots for my supper when I am so close to a life of luxury myself?"

"Close—but for me. And Dr. Lovell could have saved you the bother of killing me. He had only to say that it was I who poisoned Rich-

ard.”

“I gave that a great deal of thought, too. A great deal. Well, then supposing I had accused you of poisoning Richard. The case would have been dragged into court and all sorts of questions asked, questions which might prove embarrassing. You do have two friends who are lawyers.”

I raised my brows.

“Mr. Coombs and Mr. Culpepper. I was afraid they might prove dangerous to me.”

“You know them?”

“Of them.”

I studied her for a moment. “So you have been opening my mail.”

She spread her hands in a gesture of indifference. “I suppose I have.”

“And you withheld a few of those letters from me, perhaps?”

“Two from Mr. Culpepper, I believe.”

So Malcolm had written despite our quarrel. Thinking of him and Mr. Coombs I suddenly felt strong. “You can’t kill me without arousing curiosity,” I said. “I don’t think even Dr. Lovell’s word will satisfy my friends.”

“I don’t intend to kill you. Not personally.”

“Arthur? Arthur will do it for you?”

She gave him an oblique look. “Hardly.”

“A hired assassin?” My questions sounded ghoulisish even to me. Yet it was worse not to know.

“I shall have nothing whatever to do with it. But you will die.

Die. The word echoed in my brain with a

cold, metallic ring. So serious she was, so deadly. I wished that I could laugh at her, laugh and say, you don't expect me to stay at Wuthersfield and wait for someone to murder me, do you? But I had said enough. She was cunning and clever and I had no idea what she was thinking, what she was scheming. I only knew I must leave and quickly, secretly if I could.

"We shall see," I said, and turned from her. I walked across the room, my back held straight as a ramrod though little icy currents ran up and down it, walked to the door on the far side expecting any moment to feel Arthur's heavy hand on my arm. But nothing happened. Neither Arthur nor Thomasin tried to stop me. And that in itself was rather frightening too.

I went out into the shadowy hall and smelled the damp and dust and the dead clutter of centuries and my false bravado deserted me as fear came surging up in a sick, overwhelming tide. In my hurry to leave the library I had forgotten to take a lamp, and the darkness relieved only by a dusty, pale glow from the high window seemed more ominous and threatening than ever. I leaned against the wall wrestling with my fear for a moment and then beat it back by telling myself that to fall apart now would result in my total undoing. Summoning a badly battered will I marched across to the staircase, the vast, cavernous hall mocking the sound of my footsteps.

What did Thomasin have in mind for me? Did she imagine I would be felled by a bolt from the blue? An act of God? No. Thomasin

was too practical. Her thoughts ran along different lines. I would be struck down by something diabolical, something evil and dark and horrible, something or someone manipulated by Thomasin.

I fetched a lamp from my room and went up the back staircase to where Rosie slept. She was curled in a ball, the covers drawn to the tip of her nose, her mobcap still on her pale yellow head. "Rosie. . . , " I said, shaking her shoulder gently. "Rosie. . . "

She sprang up, startled, and opened her mouth to scream, then, recognizing me, blinked. "Oh . . . it's you, m'um."

"I'm sorry I frightened you. Rosie, please get dressed and come with me."

She got out of bed without a single question and scrambled into her clothes.

"I'm leaving Wuthersfield," I said. "And I want you to help me pack."

"Oh . . . m'um," she said, her face falling.

"Would you like to go with me?"

"Oh, yes, m'um. yes." she replied unhesitatingly.

"All right." I smiled. "Gather a few things you wish to take. But hurry."

Quickly she spread out a faded shawl and into it put an apron, a pair of shoes, two pairs of much mended drawers, a comb and a half bar of homemade soap. She brought the corners of the shawl together and tied them with a quick, deft movement, and I thought, what a contrast to her clumsy fumbling when she first came to Wuthersfield.

Together we went down the narrow staircase, I leading the way with the lamp. Along the corridor the velvet shadows pressed in soft folds, shapeless, hiding dark secrets. I hesitated, my heart suddenly racing, and lifted the lamp above my head for a better view. Even so the rays of light extended only a little way. Beyond was a no-man's land filled with what dangers I did not dare guess, and I had the sudden, terrible impulse to turn and flee. But for Rosie, breathing hard behind me, her cold fingers pressed into the small of my back, I would have done so. I moved the lamp in a slow circle and glancing straight across the hall into the gallery I saw a white face quickly withdraw. It was Arthur.

So they were watching me. I might have expected it.

My room was cold, the red embered fire glowing like an evil eye from the hearth.

"Shall I build up the fire?" Rosie asked.

"No, don't bother. There is no time. We must leave at once. I've decided not to pack, after all." I tried to keep my voice calm. Of course, it was unthinkable they would let me go freely. I was to be held prisoner, I was sure, until they were ready to kill me. How? No, I mustn't start gnawing on that bone again. Get away, leave. I had to concentrate on that.

I went to the cupboard and got my coat. From the bureau I took Richard's ring, an onyx one given to him by his father, one of the few things he had not lost at cards, a small brooch of my grandmother's, and an envelope of spare

money I kept under a pile of handkerchiefs. I thought of the cup with its arsenic soaked dregs and decided to take that too. I put it all in my handbag and drew on my coat.

"Shall you not want even a change of underthings, m'um?" Rosie asked.

"No, I think not." I looked at her and thought: Is it fair to expose her to danger too? "Rosie . . . I think I must tell you why I am leaving. Mr. and Mrs. Cates . . . are. . . ." There was no other way to put it, no time to edge into the horrible truth sideways, tactfully, easily. ". . . are wanting to kill me. . . ." A gasp, but I went on, ". . . and if you are with me you will be running a great risk. So you needn't come. . . ."

"No, m'um. I wouldn't stay. I wouldn't of stayed, no matter."

"All right then." I kissed her cheek. "Are you ready?"

"Yes, m'um," she said bravely, though I noticed her face was drained of color.

I debated a moment or two whether I ought to take a lamp or candle, but thought better of it. A light, any light, would make us more visible, an easy target. But I did slip a few matches into my pocket.

We used the backstairs, a precaution I realized as we trod the creaking steps that was hardly a precaution at all. There were two sets of stairs, two main doors, two of *them*, Arthur and Thomasin, one to guard each exit. Then I remembered the other staircase, the outer one which led to the gallery. Should we try those, or

had Thomasin already outguessed me?

I flipped a mental coin and decided we might as well continue as we were.

Unbelievably, incredibly no one stopped us. The swift rush, the surprise attack from some dark corner never materialized. We reached the kitchen door unimpeded and went out into the wind gusted dark.

The night was cold and starless. Pulling my coat tighter about me I took Rosie's arm and together we stumbled across the rutted yard, beating our way against the wind to the stables. Inside there was the smell of hay, of horse sweat, of stale horse leavings and the hollow sound of the wind skulking under the high pitched roof. Even before I struck a light, I knew by the dead silence, the horses were gone.

"We shall have to walk," I said, blowing the match out.

"I don't mind, m'um."

We emerged again into the tearing wind, stopping in the lee of the house to catch our breaths. "We shall be with the wind, m'um, once we get on the road to Lyelton," Rosie said.

"Yes," I agreed. "That ought to make it easier. Come along."

The trees bordering the lane were tossing their heads, dancing a crazy, mad dance, black against the leaden sky. We had taken only a few steps when my hand stiffened on Rosie's arm. Suddenly I did not want to go through that lane. The memory of the faceless horseman was like a cold hand at my throat. It did not help to know that the face had belonged to Ar-

thur. He might be there, hidden among the trees even now, a silent phantom waiting to pounce. It had been all too easy, too easy thus far. But perhaps, the more courageous part of me argued, perhaps Thomasin did not reckon I would try to leave until the morning. The wind swooped, tore at my ankles, swirling my skirts.

Well, then?

The only other way to leave Wuthersfield was to cut through the marshes at the back of the house. But they had been flooded this year by an excess of rain and I knew from what Arthur had once told us they were impassable. I could not see Rosie and I floundering around in water up to our necks, perhaps drowning before we lost sight of the house.

Either we must traverse the lane or go back to the house. "Here we go," I said brightly. There was no choice, really.

We held together, feeling our way through the blackness and I tried not to think of the thick growth on either side, the wind snarling through the trees, shrieking down upon us at intervals, tried not to think that this was the sort of night ghosts howled and skeletons jigged and the graves were emptied of their dead.

A sudden lull, an eerie calm caught us between blasts of wind and my arm fell from Rosie's. I thought I heard the sound of a twig snap, and then the wind rushed in again. Some instinct, some sharp honed blade of intuitive danger moved under my chest and I bent my head to Rosie's and whispered, "Run, Rosie, run!"

She slipped away like a shadow and the next instance I heard a low whine and felt a hairy thing fall heavily around my shoulders and slither down to circle my waist.

It was a rope, and before I could take a step a man's face was thrust into mine. "Caught you, didn't I?" Arthur sneered.

My tongue had gone dry and what little voice I had was lost in the wind as I pleaded, "Let me go, Arthur."

"Give us a kiss," he said, pressing his face closer.

Now, looking back, I think if I had been older, more sophisticated, more wiley, I would have done as he asked and perhaps cajoled him afterwards into setting me free. But at that moment I experienced such a powerful revulsion for the tooth jutting, slavering mouth so close to mine, I followed my immediate impulse and hit him. It was not a staggering blow or even a hard one, by any means, but it must have been a painful knock to Arthur's vanity. He stepped back and the rope tightened around my waist.

"We shall see what we can do with that pretty face," he said.

The rope grew taut. I tried to dig my heels in but a violent jerk threw me face forward into the hardened mud of the lane. I heard Arthur yowl like a mad man in the wind and then he began to draw me along at a furious pace.

Panic-stricken, my arms flailed out trying to catch hold of something, anything as I bumped over the ruts and stones. Something hit me under the chin and I tasted dirt mixed with

spittle and blood while sparks seemed to fly from the top of my skull. I arched my neck, lifting my head, clawed at the rope, wept in pain. Still the nightmare went on, with the earth grinding, tearing into my flesh.

When I seemed on the verge of losing consciousness the rope suddenly turned slack, stopped. I lay panting, breathing in the tangy, bitter earth smell, feeling humiliated, degraded. If he wanted to kill me why didn't he do so? Why must he torture me first?

"Had enough, Zillah?" Arthur asked, crouching close to me, his breath hot in my face.

An insane fury rushed to my head. Dredging up all that was left in me, every ounce of will and strength, I spat full in his face.

I heard him curse as he sprang to his feet. His boot caught me with a ferocious kick in the side. I screamed in pain and tried to roll over, cowering away from him.

"Arthur. . . !" His name rang out in the night air. "Arthur. . . !" It was Thomasin.

He yanked me to my feet and quickly unlooped the rope from around me.

"What the devil have you been doing?" Thomasin was carrying a lamp and its light held up to my face stabbed painfully at my eyes.

"I had to use a little force," Arthur replied. "She would not come willingly."

"He's lying," I said, my voice coming out muffled and thick through bruised and swollen lips. "He's lying. He roped me as if I were a savage and because I wouldn't kiss him, he . . . he . . ."

"Are you going to listen to her?" Arthur cut me off. "She fought like a tiger and I had to tie her up. Could I help it if she got a bit knocked about in the process?"

I said nothing. My torn coat, my scratched and bleeding face spoke for themselves.

"You are a bigger lout than I thought, Arthur," Thomasin said. "She will be no good to us if you kill her now."

What "good?" What did she mean?

Thomasin took my arm and began to lead me back to the house, my hurts and bruises forgotten in the fearful turmoil of my thoughts. What sort of horrible death were they saving me for?

CHAPTER XIII

Grandmama once said that fear is a good testing ground of character. Either one faces it bravely and rides it out or crumbles into gibbering helplessness. What she did not say was that there are so many kinds of fear, none of them pleasant, but somehow bearable—with one exception. That exception was fear of the unknown. I could face a mad dog, my heart leaping in my throat, confront Thomasin's anger or Arthur's brutality dry tongued and speechless, and even cross the dark, vast, shadowed hall of Wuthersfield chilled to the marrow, yet in a way manage to keep my head intact. But to be sentenced to death, not knowing when or in what manner that sentence would be carried

out was a terror I did not see how I could cope with.

Thomasin brought me back to my room, meek as a lamb, too drained, too stunned, too terrified to struggle or utter a word.

"I think you know now," she said, her smile a marvel of evil triumph, "how useless it is to try to get away."

I wanted to weep, to collapse in a heap on the floor, anything but stand there and listen.

"And don't have any illusions about that ancient bag of bones, Mr. Coombs, coming to your rescue," she added.

"Mr. Coombs. . ." Tortuous to pronounce, but his name, suddenly, was like a dancing sunbeam in the gloom.

"Yes, Mr. Coombs," she said coldly. "I think when you wrote to him last you mentioned something about going away?"

The sunbeam vanished. How could I have known that a casual, weary statement, a falsehood, really, on my part, *perhaps I shall join Augusta and her family*, would serve to reassure my old friend. When he finally did begin to worry about not hearing from me it would be too late.

"Arthur," she said past my shoulder, addressing her husband who had come into the room and was now pawing through the dresser drawers, "have you found it?"

"Not yet," he mumbled.

Thomasin turned her eyes to me. "Where did you put the cup?" she asked.

"I . . . I hid it behind some books in the

library," I lied. My handbag with the cup in it had fallen in the lane. They would probably find it anyway in the morning, but I did not see why I had to make it easy for them.

Thinking of the lane, I suddenly remembered Rosie. How could I have forgotten? Rosie. My heart swelled with a new hope. Rosie had managed to elude them. Even now she was walking the dark high road towards the distant lights of Lyleton. The wind would be with her, hurrying her along. In an hour, an hour and a half, perhaps, she would be knocking at the constable's door, and he, hearing her story, would nod and say, "I shall come at once."

"Why are you smiling?" Thomasin's sharp inquiry brought me out of my reverie.

"N . . . nothing."

"You won't have much to smile at soon," she said. She took a key from her pocket. "Come, Arthur."

When I heard the key rattle in the lock on the other side of the door I thought, well, Thomasin, you won't have much to smile at soon, either.

Rosie was bringing the constable. Of course, she would go to him, she knew that Arthur and Thomasin were trying to kill me. Rosie, my hope, my salvation. Rescue would come through her and I must not allow myself to think otherwise. I must not let my mind dwell on what Thomasin had meant by "soon," or why she had not missed Rosie, or the possibility that Rosie might fall and break a leg in the dark, nor of the constable disbelieving her tale,

nor anything else which would take me down into gloomy depression. Calm, I must be calm and patient.

I was getting out of my torn and muddied clothes when I heard a slight thump from the direction of the wardrobe. Holding my breath, I listened. There it was again! Only the slightest of sounds, a movement, a whispered rustle.

Rats? I wondered.

I tiptoed over to the wardrobe and opening it cautiously came face to face with Rosie's wide frightened eyes. "Have they gone, m'um?"

It was as if the walls of Wuthersfield had come crashing down on my head. I stared at her in shock and bitter dismay. She crouched there her wide eyes turning from fright to bewilderment to misted tears. "Have I done something I oughtn't, m'um?"

"No . . . no. . ." I managed to find my voice. *Oh, Rosie why are you here? You are supposed to be on the road to Lyleton.* "It was . . . just the surprise."

"I was hidin', m'um. When Mr. Cates grabbed you I run like you said. I run right here and hid in the wardrobe."

"But why didn't you go on into Lyleton, or home?"

"No, m'um. I couldn't, m'um, not when I seen they was goin' to hurt you. I couldn't leave you alone, m'um."

I hugged her to me. What could I say?

"M'um. We ain't lost yet. I know you'll think of somethin.' "

Her eyes were so trusting as if she thought me

old and wise and capable when I was just a few years her senior, not wise, else I would have kept silent and made tracks straight from Wuthersfield the instant I found the cup; not capable, else I would not have involved her in this mess.

"Yes, yes," I murmured. "I'll think of something."

Stripped down to my petticoat I washed my face and arms at the basin. I had scratches up and down my arms and a few on my face. My underlip was swollen to twice its size and there was a yellow bruise on my left cheek. But no bones had been broken and I was still alive. That was the main thing. I was still alive.

Rosie said, "Would you like your nightgown, m'um?"

The notion of putting on a nightgown and getting into bed as if it were just another night at the end of just another day seemed hysterically ludicrous. But Rosie wasn't trying to be funny, only helpful.

"I think not," I said. "If you would, bring me the good black." I had been wearing my every day black now ripped beyond repair and the good black was the only other mourning gown I possessed. I *wanted* to be dressed in mourning. I wanted to remember Richard, I wanted to remember that I had cruelly misjudged him, that he had died in my place and that I was angry. Anger, I discovered, was a good antidote to fear. It set the heart to pumping, the blood to flowing and kept the mind from sinking into helplessness.

"Rosie," I said, fastening the buttons up the front, "are you sure Mr. and Mrs. Cates did not see you when you returned to the house?"

"I don't think so, m'um."

"Then they won't necessarily be watching for you." Perhaps Arthur had not noticed her with me in the darkness of the lane, and both he and Thomasin believed her to be upstairs asleep in her bed. "If I could only get you out with a message," I said.

But how with the door locked? I went to it and just to make sure, tried it. The lock was old and rusted, the door protested, buckled slightly, but held.

I turned and surveyed the room. Though Rosie was small I could not send her up the chimney, not with so recent a fire in the fireplace even if I was heartless enough to do it. And we were too high for her to use the window.

My eyes continued to roam the room as I stood thinking. I remembered then the day I had arrived at Wuthersfield and, disgusted because the bedroom was filthy, a shambles, I had rolled up my sleeves and gone to work with the broom. I had been sweeping great cobwebs from the ceiling and walls and had come to an angle left of the fireplace when part of the wainscoting had come free under my broom. It was a lengthwise piece of paneling and I had hastily tacked it back into place again. It occurred to me now that there might be something interesting, helpful under that loose bit of paneling.

I picked up the lamp and crossing the room, crouched down in front of the wall. Running my

finger over the wainscoting I found the loose panel. "Bring me one of those large hatpins, will you, Rosie, please?"

With the hatpin it was the work of a half minute to pry the board free. A good sized board it had left a fairly wide hole and peering through it, with the help of the lamp, I saw several brooms hanging from pegs.

"Rosie," I said. "Have a look." She crouched down beside me. "Do you think you could squeeze through this opening?"

"Why, yes, m'um. If I hold my breath."

"There seems to be a closet on the other side. It might not be locked."

"No, m'um. None of the closets is locked."

"Perhaps you could slip through and then out of one of the downstairs doors without being seen. It would be a risk. . ."

"I'll take it, m'um."

I smiled, but her eager devotion weighed on my conscience. "You are sure?" I asked, wanting *her* reassurance, her absolution. But for me she would still be sleeping in her small room under the eaves, oblivious to everything.

"Yes, m'um."

"Perhaps. . . , " I began after a moment's thought, "it might be quicker if you went home and fetched your father and brother instead of going all the way into Lyleton."

Color flooded her face as she lowered her head. "I . . . beggin' you pardon, m'um. But my father and brother. . . , " she raised apologetic eyes, ". . . they won't never come."

"Not even if you told them I was in grave

danger?"

The red deepened, staining her thin throat.

"I see. They think me a witch."

"Yes, m'um," she said in a small voice.

"And whatever happens to me will be God's justice," I murmured. A benediction, a prayer. I had done nothing wrong, harmed no one, broken no commandment. Surely God was a better judge than the others?

"I'll walk into Lyleton like we planned, m'um," Rosie said eagerly, as if to make up for her family's superstitious dislike of me.

"You know the constable there?"

"Yes, m'um. Will Thorne."

"I'll write a note. I think that would be best." I got paper and pen and scribbled a note, making it brief, saying I was being kept a prisoner, threatened with death and would he come immediately. After I had signed it, I began to think, what if this Will Thorne was in league with Thomasin and Arthur, just as Dr. Lovell was?

"Rosie," I said, "is there a place where I might send a wire?"

"Yes, m'um, the draper's."

"The draper's? They are closed at this hour, I suppose."

"The shop, yes, m'um, but Mr. Conner has a little bell over to a side door where he has the telegraph, and he answers that any time of day or night. I know because I had a friend whose Pa died and she had to use it."

"All right, Rosie, I'll give you two notes then, one to the constable and one to Mr. Conner."

The wire was even more succinct than the note. I addressed it to Malcolm Culpepper, Court of the Inns, London. I did not know if this was sufficient address, whether my message calling for help would ever reach Malcolm, but if it did I knew he would come. Hadn't he said, years and years ago, it seemed, "if ever you should need me. . . ?" And, God knew, I needed him now.

When I had finished I put the messages in two different envelopes. "The pink one," I said, "goes to the constable, the white is the telegram. Can you remember?" Quick and bright as she was, Rosie could not read.

"Yes, m'um." She stuffed the envelopes into the pocket of her apron.

"Rosie . . . if you are the least bit frightened, you need not go."

"I'm frightened, m'um, but I want to go anyways." She gave me lopsided grin. "They shan't catch me. I'll use the pantry winder. They'll never think to watch that."

I kissed her and held her for a moment and then she was squeezing through the opening in the wall. When I heard the closet door close behind her, I replaced the panel and went and lay down on the bed.

It was going on to midnight, the witching hour. Ah, if only I were a witch, if only it were true. I pictured myself with a tall, conical, black hat flinging the casement wide, then climbing on a broomstick and with a shout of glee sailing over the sill, higher and higher into the wind roiled night.

The fire sputtered and shrank. Suppose the Devil himself should stand before me and offer me freedom? No. Impossible. The Devil, whatever he offered, always demanded something in return. Freedom and the Devil were incompatible. The Devil was evil. He was Thomasin and Arthur and all the ignorance and brutality in the world rolled into one.

How long did I have before they came for me? Supposing Thomasin should sweep into the room the next moment or the next, before Rosie hardly had a chance to get away? I rose to my feet. From experience I knew it was futile to attempt shoving the bureau to the door. But I got a chair, heavier than the one I had used the night I had barred the door against Richard, and pushing it over, jammed it securely under the door knob.

I picked up a book from the side table. Dickens. *A Tale of Two Cities*. I had read it twice, a heroic tale of self sacrifice. The hero had been a man of great courage, not like me, a coward, sending a small, innocent servant girl on a hazardous mission. But she *wanted* to go, I reasoned, reassuring myself the way all cowards do.

Where was she now? Out in the yard, running like a hare, a swift shadow down the dark lane? The constable had to come. Malcolm was only a last desperate hope, but the constable could be at Wuthersfield, riding a good horse, in three quarters of an hour. I thought of Malcolm and his sandy hair, his plain face and sweet smile and a poignant nostalgia swept over me. I re-

remembered how once he had left his hat on the bench under the gnarled fir in Grandmama's yard and the goat had eaten it except for the brim. He had put it on anyway and he had looked so funny, so comical, we had all laughed, even Grandmama. How happy we had been then, how foolishly. . .

The sound of steps in the corridor wiped the smile from my face. I put the book down slowly, my heart skipping a beat. There were two sets of footsteps, one heavy, the other light and dragging. A momentary silence during which I could hear the sound of my own breathing. The key thrust in the lock scraped through the quiet. The knob turned, rattled.

"Zillah!" Thomasin called. "Open up!"

The door began to bulge and creak as she threw her weight against it. I jumped out of bed and ran to it, pushing and then holding the chair more firmly under the knob.

"Zillah. . . ! Open up!"

I bit my lip and watched the door shiver as she shook it.

"Open up! I have that slut, Rosie, here and if you don't let me in I shall strangle her with my bare hands."

Sick with apprehension, I called, "Rosie. . . ?"

"Yes, m'um." A tiny scared voice.

I moved the chair aside and Thomasin came bursting in, pulling Rosie after her. "She's to stay with you," she said, giving her a rough push. "And I advise you not to try that chair business again."

She left, banging the door shut. The key turned.

"I'm sorry, m'um," Rosie said tearfully.

"You did your best. You have nothing to be sorry for." I put my arm around her bony shoulders. "Thank God, you were not hurt."

"They caught me in the pantry. Mr. Cates did, before I'd the chance to lift the winder. He thought I'd been hidin' there all along. And I didn't tell him different."

"So you have the notes, and they don't know about them?"

"No, m'um."

"Well, that's to the good," I said. Rosie had not been able to get away, but at least they had no suspicion that she and I had conspired to summon the constable, no suspicion of the loose panel in the wall.

Some other plan would come to me. I lay down on the bed, propping the pillows high behind me. Rosie curled up in a deep cushioned chair. "Will you be comfortable there?" I asked. "Perhaps you'd like to lie down? There is plenty of room beside me."

"Thank you, m'um. But I'd only fall asleep and I don't want to."

"There is no point in both of us staying awake," I said after a moment's reflection. "You go on and take a nap and I'll get you up in say. . . , " I glanced at the clock, ". . . two hours."

"If you think it's all right, m'um?"

"Of course."

She tucked her feet under her. "This is fine

here," she said.

I took a blanket from the foot of the bed and covered her with it. She smiled gratefully up at me. "We'll get out of this," I said, "you'll see."

"I know we will, m'um."

I wished I had her confidence. I did not really see how Rosie and I taking turns at napping and waiting could in any way serve a useful purpose. Whatever we were trying to guard against would come, willy-nilly, whether we were asleep or awake. We were at their mercy. Still, it helped to have an illusion of strategy.

I gazed thoughtfully at the door, then at the chair I had moved aside a short while ago. I went over to it now and shoved it back under the knob. Thomasin's recent threat meant little in the face of the larger one, the all encompassing, ultimate one. I had nothing to lose by disobeying her and the thought of delaying her re-entry into the room (and it would only be a delay, for Arthur with his brute strength would smash the door open eventually) gave me some satisfaction.

But when would Thomasin come back? I lay down on the pillows again and picked up the book. Would she come back at all? *She* was not going to kill me, nor was Arthur, nor was an assassin. It "would be done." A macabre riddle, a terrifying puzzle. Perhaps, I thought, she meant to starve us to death. We had no food and I had already used half a pitcher of precious water for washing. How long could we exist without food, without water? Two days, three, a week? Ah, but—I let out my breath as I remembered,

there was the loose panel and the broom closet. They don't know about the broom closet.

I opened the book, *Chapter Three*, and began to read mechanically with my eyes while my thoughts ran helter skelter through my head. Soon the words began to run together, my eyelids grew heavier and heavier. . .

The next thing I knew I was blinking my eyes open in the wan, ivy rippled sunlight. I had slept through the night. With a pang of guilt I glanced quickly over to the chair. Rosie was gone! I heard a clank of iron and turning my head saw her on the hearth, stirring up the fire.

"Oh," I said. "I *am* sorry. I didn't mean to sleep through."

"It's all right, m'um. I guess we was both tired. Nothin's happened."

"No. We're still here. Did you have a good sleep?"

"Yes, m'um."

I got up and went to the window. The sun was breaking through a bank of rose tinted clouds. "Looks like it will be a nice day," I said, hope rising in me because we had survived the night, because I was young, because it was a new day, because I had a sudden feeling, though irrational, of my own immortality.

I turned to Rosie who had managed to coax flames from the blackened logs. "Did Mr. and Mrs. Cates say anything about . . . about me? I mean what they planned to do with me?"

"No, m'um. They talked some, but it weren't about you."

"What did they say?"

She thought for a moment. "Well, Mrs. Cates said, 'Tomorrow is Guy Fawkes day,' and Mr. Cates said, 'Thank God.' "

"Guy Fawkes day?" I said and shrugged. "Well, that means nothing to me."

But it did, it did, had I but known.

CHAPTER XIV

During the next hour I worked at the panel in the wall in an attempt to widen the hole so that both Rosie and I could get through. I was not going to have Rosie risk it without me again. I had posted her at the door to listen for the sound of approaching footsteps. The wood rasped and groaned noisily under my hands and I did not want Thomasin coming up to the door, unknown to us, guessing what we were about.

My progress was agonizingly slow, made more difficult because of two tiers of solid brick forming an el behind the second panel. Why there had not been solid wall backing the first panel I had no idea. Perhaps the bricks were

part of an old chimney. As I pried and wrenched using the only tool I had, the fireplace poker, sweating and muttering under my breath, I became more and more convinced that the house itself was in league against me. Old, rotting, parts of it tumbling down, it was still a fortress, still a prison, *my* prison.

"Would you like me to try for a bit, m'um?" Rosie asked.

"No," I said, resting for a moment on my heels. "I've almost got it."

Attacking the panel once more, it suddenly came away with a sharp, crackling sound, so loud I was sure it could be heard all the way to Lyleton. I turned to Rosie and we looked at one another, both tense, both listening. There was silence outside in the corridor, the quiet within disturbed only by our breathing and the hurried, impatient tick-tock of the clock on the bureau.

I turned my attention back to the wall. The bricks, gleaming a faded umber, were held together by mortar of porous gray. I tapped at them with the poker and a fine ash dribbled down. "I don't think these will give me too much trouble," I said to Rosie. "The bricks seem very old. If I only had a stout knife."

"Will a spoon do, m'um?" she asked. "There's one on the mantel."

"Perhaps it will."

The spoon was an iron one and it worked, but so slowly, so slowly. I dug and hacked and chipped away until it felt as if my hands were not hands but numb attachments to wooden

limbs. When I began to falter seriously, I let Rosie spell me.

It seemed that we had worked and sweated and groaned an eternity before the first brick came loose, but surprisingly it had only taken an hour. I eased the brick free and was immediately struck by a fetid, damp odor. As I gazed at the small black opening leering at me like a parted, black mouth an inexplicable emotion crept over me, cold, prickling fear mingled with a feeling of utter sadness and despair.

Why should a blank brick wall have the power to raise the hairs on the back of my neck? Make me want to weep? It's the base of an old bricked over fireplace, I told myself. Go ahead, the next brick, the next brick will be easier. You will never get out of here if you sit like a goose, afraid of nothing.

I tried to raise the spoon but could not. Slowly I turned my head. Rosie was watching me, her eyes grown immense, her face blanced to bone white.

"Do you feel it, too?" I asked.

She nodded, voiceless.

I got up from the floor and as I walked toward the window the terror, or whatever it was, began to recede. I leaned against the sill, dabbing at my damp forehead with a handkerchief. There was something behind those bricks, something terrible and sad, something I could not face. And yet I must. There was no other way out of the room and time was passing, hurrying on its journey toward doomsday with every tick of the clock.

"What d'you suppose 'tis, m'um?" Rosie whispered.

"I don't really know," I said, staring straight in front of me. "I have a strange feeling . . . I . . . there's someone dead there, someone who has been dead for a very long time."

I heard Rosie gasp. "Who . . . m'um?"

"I don't really know. But . . . I think. . ."

And then it came to me as if some unknown, mysterious source had planted the thought in my head. ". . . I think it is the witch of Wuthersfield."

"A witch? But . . . m'um, you said you didn't believe in such. . ."

"I don't." I forced myself back to the opening in the wall and knelt in front of it. "I don't. I believe that girl was innocent as so many accused in her day were, good people who perhaps looked or thought or acted a little differently than their neighbors, but completely innocent of any converse with the Devil. It was their accusers, their executioners who were guilty, who were evil."

As I spoke these words a curious thing happened. The feeling of misery and despair lifted as if a heavy hand had been taken from my heart. And it seemed as I knelt there, looking down into the hole, I heard the flutter of a sigh. Perhaps it was Rosie's or my own, or even the wind outside. But I like to think that my words had somehow eased the torment which haunted that spot, for I was able to take up my work again, chipping at the mortar without any sense

of discomfort.

In a short while I had removed enough of the bricks to make a large gap. "Bring me a candle," I said to Rosie.

When I cast the light down into the hole I saw that my instinct or intuition had been right. The light revealed a skeleton, slight in size, a skeleton which could very well have been Gwendolyn Cates, the so-called witch of Wuthersfield. As I remembered the story she had committed suicide, and I wondered if her family, fearful that her body would be rendered limb from limb by the enraged populace, had put it behind the wall for safekeeping. Without knowing why Gwendolyn had been condemned as a witch, what she looked like, how or when she had died, I felt a kinship with her. She must have known hope and fear and bitter desperation, must have felt the injustice of an unreasonable sentence very much like I did now. I promised myself that if ever I should leave Wuthersfield alive I would give those poor, sad bones a decent burial.

The el-shaped part of the wall, more porous and fragile than the other, came apart quite easily and the hole was now wide enough for both Rosie and I to crawl through comfortably. My plan was to hide in one of the unused bedrooms from where I could have a view of the front door. If the door was not watched then it would be a simple (I hoped) matter to sneak down the stairs and through it. I rather doubted the doors would be guarded too well since Thomasin believed us to be safely locked up. The

plan might go better after dark, but I dared not risk waiting.

I put on a warm cape. "We must be very quiet," I said to Rosie.

She nodded. I was glad to see the color had come back to her face. She stood there, muffled to the ears in an old coat of mine, her small face, eager, expectant, the face of a child about to set off on a forbidden adventure. She went through the gap and I followed. There was enough light seeping in to find the knob without difficulty. I twisted it and then twisted it again, not believing, my heart turning over in a sickening thump. The door was locked!

A low chuckle came from the other side. The same sneering, snickering laugh I had heard in the gallery, and for a moment I thought the evil ghost of Wuthersfield had come to bar our way.

"Thought you would get out, did you?" It was Arthur, his voice thick with smothered humor.

Rosie clutched my arm.

"I've been waiting for you all morning," Arthur said. "Heard you sawing away in there." He laughed. "Cat got your tongue?"

I turned and getting to my knees pushed through the rubbled gap in the wall back into the bedroom, swallowing the bitter lump in my throat. Rosie came after me, her eager look gone. I was brushing the cobwebs and gray dust from my cape when I heard the closet door open. So deep had I been in my disappointment it took me a precious moment or two to connect Arthur with that door. Then I ran to the fire-

place and grabbed the poker. But before I could get back to the wall, Arthur had crawled through and was on his feet.

I faced him, the poker raised above my head.

He laughed. "You are very beautiful. Most beautiful when you are angry." His tongue flicked over his teeth. "Ah, Richard had good taste, I must say."

"Get out!" I ordered. "Get out or I'll kill you!"

He laughed again, and then, as casually as one would swat an irksome fly, he slapped me across the face with one hand and with the other wrested the poker from me.

"This is a dangerous plaything," said, advancing on me as I shrank from him. He pressed the tip of the poker into the little hollow at the base of my throat. I stumbled, trying to evade him, but he relentlessly forced me backward step by step until I felt the bed behind me. From the corner of my eye I saw Rosie rush at him, grabbing his coattails. Without shifting his gaze from my face, Arthur reached round with one of his giant paws and plucked Rosie free, tossing her to the floor. Then, to my sick horror, he turned and kicked her. She cried out in pain.

"No!" I screamed, afraid that he would kick her again.

"Ah . . . so that's it. I will leave her alone, then. For a small price." He dropped the poker and pulled me to him. His breath was rancid, his eyes hot with desire.

"No . . . Thomasin. . ."

"Thomasin needn't know." He brought his hungry, moist mouth down on mine, soiling it, bruising it. I struggled in his grasp, my stomach knotted with anger and disgust. He lifted his face and still holding me, began to wrench at the buttons of my cape.

It was then that I heard a furious knocking on the door. Arthur heard it too. He let go of me and rearranging his face went to the door, shoving the chair aside.

Thomasin came in. "What have you been up to?" she asked, eyeing Arthur suspiciously.

"Nothing," said Arthur, as if butter could not melt in his mouth. "I had to come in through the hole they've been working at." He waved at the gap in the wall. "So I could remove the chair."

"Hmmm." She gave him a long look.

"He's lying," I said. "Arthur tried to rape me."

Arthur flushing angrily said, "All right, you bitch. I didn't want to say anything, but, Thomasin. . ." he turned to her, "the slut threw herself at me. Said I could have her if I let her go. She bribed me with all sorts of promises, telling me how she would. . ."

Thomasin interrupted, "I haven't got time to listen now. Arthur, tie the girls up and bind their mouths."

Arthur looked at her blankly.

"Hurry, do as I say! Use the bedsheets, anything." She went to the bed and tore the cover from it. "Pillow cases," she said, tossing a pillow at him.

He stripped it and pushing me into a straight chair, bound my hands behind my back. Then taking a length of knotted sheet from Thomasin he wound it round and round my body, securing me firmly to the chair.

He did the same with Rosie.

Pinned, transfixed into helplessness, my forehead damp with the sweat of fear, I was sure my moment had come. I was being readied for my execution. Should I cry, beg, plead for their mercy? I looked across at Thomasin who stood watching Arthur tie the last knot in Rosie's bonds. She had a smug smile on her pointed, fox-like face. No. Even if I had not been gagged I couldn't beg from her. I could not give her the satisfaction.

"What's it all about?" Arthur asked.

"There's a visitor downstairs."

A visitor!

My heart soared, the blood in my hands tingled. A visitor! Someone I knew, obviously, somebody friendly, else why would Thomasin find it necessary to gag us? Someone who had come to inquire. Mr. Coombs? Malcolm? Or Dr. Lovell, perhaps, conscience stricken, saying he had thought it over and arsenic poisoning was too serious a matter. . .

As Thomasin and Arthur went through the door I heard Arthur ask, "Who is it?" And though I strained to catch a name, her reply eluded me.

Silence settled in around us. The minutes ticked by and I began to think that perhaps I had been overly optimistic. Thomasin was clev-

er enough to fend off embarrassing questions, glib enough to explain away my absence. She could say I was ill, resting, or that I had left Wuthersfield altogether. I could see her in my mind's eye sitting very straight in her favorite chair in the library, hands folded neatly in her lap, the usual all-purpose, dreadful smile curving her thin lips. "Yes, I am afraid Zillah has taken Richard's death very hard," I could imagine her saying. "She's gone off to be by herself. Perhaps Torquay or Bournemouth or London. No, she did not say which." And he, whoever it was, would he believe her?

I prayed to God he would not. But suppose God did not hear my prayer, suppose the visitor was already getting to his feet, saying goodbye?

My mind seesawed, hovering between hope and despair, one moment expecting the door to fly open and a dear, familiar face to exclaim, "Zillah! What have they done to you?" and the next thinking that the face at the door would be neither dear nor familiar but Thomasin's or Arthur's.

No, I could not pin all my hopes on some distant chance that someone downstairs might guess my dilemma. I began to work at the stripped sheeting which bound me, trying to extricate myself. But Arthur had done a very thorough job of it and I got nothing for my trouble except a crick in the neck and a burning pain at my wrists. Rosie, I saw, was attempting to do the same, wriggling and grimacing, brushing her head against the back of her chair. She was patient, though, and did not give up as

quickly as I, resting every now and again and trying anew. I watched her, fascinated, my admiration for her pluck, her persistence growing. When she finally managed to work the gag free, a stifled cheer rose in my throat.

Scream! I willed her, my eyes straining with urgency.

She did not scream, did not utter a sound, but began rubbing her bound wrists against the back of the chair.

Rosie, please scream. It will be too late. . .

She did not look at me. Her eyes bulged, beads of moisture began to form on her brow as she sawed steadily away. Impatience gathered like a fist in my chest. Why did she waste precious time in useless effort?

Rosie, please, Rosie. . .

And then suddenly the cloth fell away from her hands. A half minute later she was out of the chair, bending over me, removing my gag. I opened my parched mouth, filled my lungs with sweet air and summoned a scream.

The sound startled me. It was a hoarse, ineffectual croak.

"No one can hear us, m'um," Rosie said, tugging at my bound wrists. "I thought it best if we both went to the winder and watched who came out and shouted from there."

"Yes . . . yes, you are right." Rosie had been far more practical minded than I. "Please . . . hurry."

She did her best, but the knots were stubborn. Arthur, out of vexation, had tied me more securely than Rosie. An eternity went by, an

age during which I saw our last chance at rescue disappearing forever. And then, suddenly, I was free. I sprang to my feet and we ran to the window. Fumbling with the latch, I pushed the paned glass out and leaned over the sill. The late afternoon sun was behind us, casting the house's shadow across the weed choked drive. A cold, deserted stillness hung in the air. As I strained to see, the faint trit-trot of a horse's hooves came to my ears. Lifting my head I thought I saw a flash of gray pass through the amber blaze of the trees in the distant lane. I began to shout and wave my hands frantically, Rosie joining me. We screamed and hollered and all but fell from the window in our desperation to attract attention. There seemed to be one last flash of gray and then no more.

A bird twittered in the silence, a chill little breeze ruffled my hair. He was gone, our mysterious, unknown visitor was gone. He had not heard us. Apparently no one had, for there was no rush of footsteps along the corridor. Even Thomasin and Arthur seemed oblivious to the commotion we had raised.

Standing there in the silence of the dying sun, I began to wonder if there had been a visitor, if Thomasin had not invented him in order to get Arthur downstairs. Or perhaps she had dreamed up our caller in order to torment me. Yes, that would be like Thomasin. No one had knocked at our front door. There was no visitor, would never be one. My hope of rescue had been a cruel illusion. Watching the long shadows inch their way past the privet hedges and

over the tangled lawns to the tree lined lane, our isolation, our loneliness stabbed me with an almost unbearable pang. I felt as if some catastrophe had befallen the world, wiping out all of mankind except the four of us in this ruin of a house. And of the four, two of us would soon die, Rosie and myself, for they would never allow Rosie, a dangerous witness, to live.

The twilight deepened, the last flash of sunlight staining the gray-green sky with red. In less than an hour night would be upon us. I dreaded it.

"Shall I light the fire?" Rosie suddenly asked behind me.

"No . . . I . . ." With an effort I lifted myself to the contingency of the moment. I couldn't allow my disappointment to cancel all hope. "I think we ought to tie ourselves up again. When Mr. and Mrs. Cates return they might be careless about the door if they think we are helpless. Should they be—and you see your chance, Rosie, make a run for it."

"But, m'um. . ."

"Please don't argue, Rosie dear," I sighed. "They will be watching *me* more closely than you. And it will help us both if you can get away."

We each had a sip of water from the pitcher and then we trussed ourselves up again and sat waiting as darkness stole quietly, relentlessly into the room. The bureau clock chimed six. The bed, the wardrobe, Rosie's chair began to take on unfamiliar shadowy shapes. Outside the wind scraped at the ivy, a board creaked,

the ashes stirred on the hearth. My heart counted out the seconds. It was horrible to sit there and do *nothing*.

I began to think of Grandmama then, and all my life that had gone before. Was there anything I could have done differently, any path I might have taken which would have led me away from peril? Or would Thomasin have hunted me out no matter where I went or what I did? Perhaps my nightmare had really begun the moment I was born.

The clock spoke again-half past the hour. Five minutes later the key turned in the lock. The door opened and Arthur came in carrying a tray set with a lighted lamp and an assortment of dishes. The light sweeping upward made thin, black slits of his eyes.

"Brought your dinner," he said, kicking the door closed behind him. He lurched over to the bureau and plopped the tray down, rattling the dishes.

Turning, he surveyed us both. "Can't eat it, can you?" he tittered drunkenly. "All tied up. Ain't that a shame." He lumbered over to me and with a cruel jerk whipped the gag from my mouth.

He studied my face for a moment, then wagged his finger. "Mustn't touch. But one little kiss won't hurt. . ."

Rosie chose that moment to leap to her feet and make a dash for the door. He caught her before she got it open, and dragging her back across the room flung her into the chair like a rag doll. "Is that the way I'm treated when I

bring your dinner? Well, eat the damned thing and I hope you choke." He stumbled to the door, wrenched it open and slammed it behind him. I heard the fumbling of the key on the other side.

"It was a good try, Rosie," I said, unwinding the make-believe bonds. "Are you all right?"

"Yes, m'um. At least he brought us somethin' to eat."

At the word "eat" I became aware of the tantalizing odors which came from the tray. I had not had a morsel of food since the night before and my stomach rumbled with emptiness.

"Roast beef," said Rosie wistfully, gazing down at the tray. "Parsleyed potatoes. . ."

"We dare not touch it." It would be like Thomasin to starve us all day and then present us with a toothsome meal, one impossible to resist, but saturated with poison.

Rosie stuck her finger in the tray, then licked it. "Tastes all right, m'um."

"Probably does," I said. "But Rosie there are some poisons that have no taste, no smell. I think we had best forget our dinner."

"Not even the tea, m'um?" Her tongue darted out as she licked her dry lips.

"Especially the tea."

I moved the lamp and took the tray to the window, opened it and dropped the whole thing out. "That way we won't be tempted," I said.

Rosie was bending to pick up a salt shaker which had fallen from the tray and rolled over near the door when she straightened up suddenly. "Why, m'um. . ." She went to the door,

and to my astonishment, and hers, too, she opened it.

"He missed locking it!" I exclaimed, excited. "The drunken fool! Quickly, quickly get into your coat . . . my cape, yes, there it is."

It took two seconds and we were out in the corridor, closing the door gently behind us. Shrinking back into the shadows, hugging the wall, we crept along the passage until we reached the staircase.

The house was silent, eerie, ominous with silence. No wind outside, no groaning boards, no scampering of tiny unseen feet behind the wainscoting, just a deadly, unholy silence, a vacuum as if the house were holding its breath, biding its time, waiting. . .

Some instinct, some nameless premonition deep within warned me to go back, not to descend those stairs. But cold reason brushed it aside. I could not return to that room and calmly await my fate. And I might not have another chance to escape.

Grasping Rosie's moist hand I whispered, "Quietly, now." And like two desperate characters in a melodrama we went down step by step. Moisture gathered on my forehead and my heart seemed suspended in space like the deadly silence around us. It was a clear night. I could tell by the moonlight pouring through the high window, casting a cross barred silhouette on the stone floor of the hall.

Where were they, I wondered, Thomasin and Arthur? Were they even now watching us from the shadows, Thomasin secretly smiling to her-

self, Arthur suppressing a chuckle?

We reached the bottom of the stairs. I had always hated the hall, feared it, but now it seemed more inimical to me than ever. I let out my breath, drew it in again, and tightened my hold on Rosie's damp, cold hand. Poor child. It had long since ceased to be an adventure for her. She was badly frightened too.

We started across the floor, a vast moonlit expanse, a thousand miles it seemed to the shadowed front door. We had almost reached it when suddenly, a light flickered and blazed and I was staring into Thomasin's yellow-brown eyes.

"Are you leaving, then?" she asked in that polite, obsequious tinged voice she had always used before she revealed herself as a murderess. "So soon?"

I could not speak. It was as if a stone had suddenly become lodged in my throat.

"Since you are wearing your cloak, I take it you are," she said, adjusting the flame of the lamp. "And Rosie, too."

She turned and to my utter amazement opened the door wide.

Beyond it I saw the gig, the horse, harnessed and waiting.

"And I had the forethought to pack some of your things, too," she said, reaching down and lifting a valise.

I took it with numb fingers.

"Pleasant journey," she said, and this time I caught a faint sneer in her voice.

I ran my tongue over my lips. "Why. . . ?"

The word came out hoarsely. "Why . . . are you doing this?" It was a trap, she had some diabolical plan up her sleeve. I knew it, I sensed it, every fiber of my being screamed it. But there was the open door and the sweet smelling night air flowing in, and the gig standing there, waiting.

"You said you wanted to leave, didn't you?" she asked. "Well. . . , " she made a sweeping motion with her hand.

"Arthur is out there," I said. "He's posted outside . . . hiding."

"Arthur? Not at all. He is in the kitchen, drinking himself stupid."

"But why. . . ?" I asked, not understanding, still suspicious.

"I've had a change of heart. It is as simple as that."

Had she? Or had someone changed it for her? Perhaps there had been a visitor after all, one who was suspicious, one who might make trouble if anything happened to me.

"Don't look a gift horse in the mouth," she said. "Go on, go. Else I might change my mind again."

Clutching Rosie's hand, I hurried through the door. It closed behind us, but not before I heard Thomasin laugh, a low, nasty laugh, chilling my blood. We did not linger, but got up into the seat of the gig. I clucked and the horse began to trot down the drive, the brittle stones and fallen twigs snapping and crunching under the wheels. The night was windless, warm for November, a soft night, a beautiful night under

a high domed, star studded sky. The moon, full and round and luminous, shone down upon us, lighting the way.

We reached the lane and I remembered how twice Arthur had sprung out from behind the trees. I grasped the whip, holding it ready. I had no way of knowing whether Thomasin had spoken the truth. Perhaps Arthur was in the kitchen swilling wine, drunk, dead to the world. On the other hand, I thought, looking furtively from left to right, he might be that moving shadow behind that tree or that bush.

Swallowing hard, I flicked the whip over the horse's rump and she broke into a canter. We had almost reached the end of the lane when several lights appeared ahead of us. They were torches carried by men, farmers, I guessed by their clothes. When I halted the horse I heard Rosie gasp, "It's my Pa. . . !"

Looking more closely I saw now that the man leading the others was, indeed, Rosie's father. I recognized his sunbaked face, his short, stocky build. He came up to the gig. "So you are all right, then, Rosie."

"Yes, Pa . . . I. . ."

"Come along," he said gruffly. Reaching up, he lifted her bodily from the gig.

Behind him a man shouted. "There she be! There's the witch of the moors!"

Terror seized me as the men pressed about, rocking the gig, their faces lurid under the flickering torchlight.

"No. . . , " I started to protest.

"Witch!" Another shout, a chorus of shouts,

“Witch! Witch!”

A hand shot up and grabbed my skirt, another tore the whip from my hand. “No. . . !” My cry lost in the howl of the mob as I was tumbled from my seat.

“Wait!” Rosie’s father’s voice shouted above the din. “We do this as planned.”

Released I drew myself up and found that I was facing Rosie’s father with Rosie, ashen faced, in his grasp. “Let me pass,” I said, clenching my jaw to keep it from trembling. “Let me pass at once!”

Rosie’s father did not move, but twisting his head, called over his shoulder, “Clem, take Rosie home.”

“No, Pa!” Rosie cried, struggling to free herself. “I want to stay with the Captain’s wife.”

Her father smacked her across the face. “Do as I say.”

A young man elbowed his way forward.

“She’s no witch,” Rosie’s tearful voice argued. “She’s the kindest, nicest. . .” The young man tucked her under his arm, as he would a protesting pullet. The crowd parted to let them through with Rosie screaming and crying.

“Why are you doing this?” I demanded in a voice high and strained.

“Yer a witch, is why.”

“I am no such thing. . .” The voice steadier now, not like my heart thrumming a wild, fearful tattoo.

“Y’have queer dreams and tell the future. Y’put the evil eye on that dog. And if that ain’t

enough, y'stole my Rosie."

"I did not. She came of her own free will, because you beat her. . ."

"T'ain't the first time she's been beat. She knows she's got a good home. She'd never left it willingly. . ."

"But she did! She. . ."

"Y' stole her for yer doin's with the Devil!" he shouted. "And the Cap'n . . . a healthy man like that, taken sick and dyin'. Y'put a curse on him."

"I did not. I do not know *how* to put a curse on *anyone*."

"And yer made the rains come. Spoiled our crops. We got the proof. . ." He waved his hand. "Fields all flooded half the summer."

"It rained," I said, telling myself that I must be firm. "It rained before I ever came to Wuthersfield. Rained and snowed."

"I hear y'can cast a spell and yer make images and curses and yer be the granddaughter of the witch of the moors."

"Where did you hear such nonsense?" I said indignantly, but I was sick inside, sick with fury and fear.

"Mrs. Thomasin Cates told us. . ."

"She lied." A nerve twitched behind my eye as the memory of the chemist's voice came to me, "I hear tell. . ." Thomasin had spread the word well.

"So yer to answer for it!" Rosie's father concluded stolidly, his eyes glowing with pinpoints of fire.

"I warn you not to touch me or the law will

punish you."

"No one will know but us here, and we're sworn to silence. Right, men?"

A series of grunts and "ayes" went round the grim faced circle.

"Let's get on with it," I heard a deep throat-ed voice call from the shadows beyond the range of flickering torchlight.

"Right y'are. Timothy, come ahead then."

A burly man, his bald pate gleaming red, el-bowed his way forward. He was carrying a large beam aloft. "Who's got the clothes?" Rosie's father wanted to know.

A stout, neckless man appeared. Over his arm was draped what looked like miscella-neous, sooty rags, and in his hand was a scare-crow mask.

I stared at the mask and everything came together then; Guy Fawkes Day, Thomasin saying, "It will be done for me," her laugh when she closed the door on us a little while earlier, everything. And I knew, at last, how I was to die.

CHAPTER XV

Thomasin, clever Thomasin had plotted with guile. A hint casually dropped here, a suggestive remark there, seeds planted in the fertile superstitious minds of people already innately suspicious and mistrustful of strangers had worked marvelously to her advantage. Those seeds had germinated, grown, thrived, aided by the wet disastrous summer and by a set of circumstances in which I had been unhappily and innocently involved.

Was Guy Fawkes Day Thomasin's idea too? Yes, it had to be. It must. How inventive to bend to her own purpose this old fashioned holiday celebrating the execution of a man once, long ago accused of trying to blow up Parlia-

ment. Though it had been almost three hundred years since he was caught and hung, Fawkes was still burned in effigy each November fifth in bonfires all over England. Great, roaring bonfires, which the straw-stuffed scarecrow Fawkes was consumed to a handful of ashes.

Just as they planned to do with me!

"You can't!" I shouted. "They will catch and punish you."

But who would know? Rosie's father had been right. No one would know. No one would guess. Thomasin, if asked, would say I had left Wuthersfield and simply disappeared. And Rosie, safely tucked away at home, would never suspect.

"You can't. . . !" I screamed.

A rag was stuffed in my mouth. My heart shrank, for now it was past argument, past reason, past belief. My hat was snatched from my head, my cape, my dress and petticoats stripped from me. There was no time, no room, to feel shame at my nakedness. Nor did I think any of them looked upon me with other than anger crazed eyes. They had peeled me as they might peel an ear of corn. Clumsy but strong hands pulled a shirt over my head, trousers over my legs. I was like a rag doll tossed and jerked and twirled amidst flame gilded, anonymous faces. The mask was slapped across my face. A rope snaked about my waist, pulling tight, and my head cracked against wood as I was tied to the beam.

I was lifted high, high above the mob.

Through slits in the mask I looked down with horror upon a lake of fire, the heads and shoulders of the men moving forward like a flowing pack of hungry hounds. I prayed that I might faint, lose consciousness, descend into a black pit, a void, not know, not feel any of the nightmare I found myself in.

I closed my eyes, but the painful jolting of the beam pried them open. We were crossing a field and far in the distance I saw small, red suns rise one by one, flecking the countryside with tufts of fire, the bonfires of other hamlets. It was as if the entire world were going up in the flames of the damned.

Now we were climbing, I could tell, higher and higher. The wind inched its way under the mask, under the legs of the grotesque trousers and through the gaps between the buttons of the raggedy shirt I wore, pinching and poking with long cold fingers. Earth and sky reeled suddenly once around, a thud of the beam jarred my skull, and movement ceased.

Looking down again I saw that the beam had been stuck fast in a pile of trash, a huge pyre of dead tree and bramble branches and thorn faggots. They would burn quickly with a bright, intense heat. Somewhere—oh, dear God, where?—I had read that the condemned witches of old, those sad victims of hysteria were advised by those who felt pity for them to breathe in the smoke, taking great gulps of it, thus losing consciousness before the painful, scathing flames could roast their flesh. Would I remember? Or would my heart burst with terror,

as it surely must before then?

Oh, Grandmama, Grandmama, what should I do? I'm so afraid. Save me, help me. It was a cry, a whimper going over and over inside me.

A series of shouts lifted my sagging head. I saw another crowd of people coming up the hill, male and female, and, dear God, children! They shouted and dashed about in a circle, some masked, their shrill voices echoing with glee. The dark, mysterious night and the fire soon to be lit had made them wild with excitement.

"Might I light it?" a towheaded mite asked of a man with a torch.

He patted the blond, straw colored head. "Go ahead, then, Charley."

The child grasping the torch dipped it and a tiny flame spat like an adder's tongue, curled round a branch.

"Die! Die!" the children chanted, hands linked, making a circle. "Die! Guy Fawkes, die!"

I watched the tiny flame, wavering, growing, wavering growing. So intent was I on that bit of flame I was not aware the chanting had suddenly stopped until the flame, probably reached a damp spot, sputtered and went out. When I raised my eyes I saw two men, one a stranger by his city dress, engaged in earnest conversation with Rosie's father. They had their backs to me and I could not see their faces. Then the stranger turned and I came near fainting.

It did not seem possible!

Malcolm? Here? Malcolm here, in this place?

But there were the reddish sideburns and the high cheekbones. It was him. An uprush of relief, of pure joy engulfed me. Malcolm! *I was saved!*

I tried to call to him but the gag choked my words. Never mind it would be only a matter of minutes. He was looking at me now and my tongue strained against the rag in my mouth while my heart took an extra beat. He went on looking and looking. And it suddenly came to me with all the agony of a thirst crazed wanderer who has the water filled cup snatched from his trembling lips before he can drink. *Malcolm could not see me!*

How could he? Hidden as I was behind a mask, dressed in the ill fitting clothes of a farm laborer, an image of Guy Fawkes?

Malcolm! A voice inside my head screamed. *Malcolm!*

He turned back. A few more words were spoken. I saw the other man then. It was Colby. Had he together with Malcolm come to inquire about me? And now Colby was staring at me. *COLBY! Please, I'm here!* I took back every terrible thing I had ever thought or said about him. I prayed that he would forgive me, would guess that it was me, Zillah Ashland Cates, behind the silly mask.

But no. Malcolm tapped him on the arm, the crowd parted and they started through, going away.

Malcolm! It was as though an iron spike had been struck straight to the core of my being. I felt the tears rolling down my cheeks, smother-

ing, wet and salty, mingling with the rotted odor of the mask. In my bitter anguish I began to bang my head again and again against the beam, whacking my skull, wanting to crush it, to cheat them, all of them, some waiting for their night's amusement, others for their ghoul-lish revenge. I understood now to the full my feeling of kinship with the long dead Gwendolyn. Surrounded, beleaguered, facing a horrible death she had tricked her tormentors. I wished I could do the same.

In the midst of my despair and pain I heard a child shriek, "No! You shan't touch it! It's our Guy Fawkes. . . !"

And suddenly through a red mist, there below, as if in a miraculous, heaven sent dream, was Malcolm again! He waded through the dead brush and litter, kicking a path to the very base of the pole on which I hung. I tried to wag my head, but the last bit of strength had gone out of me.

"Here, Colby," I heard Malcolm say. "Give me a hand with this."

Rosie's father, thrashing after Malcolm, protested. "No . . . you dasn't . . . it's ours. . ."

"I tell you I'm an officer of the law." Malcolm's voice was authoritative, not at all like the usual quiet voice I was accustomed to. "Quickly there, Colby."

Rosie's father hurried back to the ringed on-lookers and he and some of the crowd began to slink away as the beam was lifted down. Malcolm tore the mask from my face and the gag

from my mouth. I was conscious of the chorus of "oh's" and "ah's" as the rope was loosened from round my waist and I fell weakly but gratefully into Malcolm's protective arms.

CHAPTER XVI

Though I wanted to leave Wuthersfield, Lyleton, the whole hateful neighborhood at once, that night, walk if I must, shedding the nightmare like a muddied cloak, I could not. After Malcolm had bundled me into his carriage, reviving me with a flask of brandy, I blurted out the terrible story from beginning to end. It was then he explained to me that Thomasin and Arthur must be brought to justice and that my testimony was essential.

"You needn't return to the house," he explained. "I'll have the landlady at the *Golden Eye* fix you up comfortably. And I shan't be far away." He smiled that sweet, gentle smile.

I took his hand. "Malcolm, how did you

know . . . I mean, what brought you to that place . . . the bonfire. . . ?”

“It’s a rather roundabout tale. When I heard of Richard’s death I sent you a note, very formal, I must admit. . .”

“I never got it,” I interrupted. “Thomasin took it.”

“She did? Well, when I did not hear from you I believed you were still put out with me, so I decided to come in person. I thought the worst thing that could happen was your slamming the door in my face. But when I got there. . .”

“When? This afternoon?”

“This afternoon.” So that flash of gray had been Malcolm “. . . Thomasin told me you had gone, she did not know where.”

“I was upstairs, all along, bound and gagged.”

“You poor darling,” he said, patting my hand. “I thought your departure without any hint of a destination rather strange, but Thomasin assured me you wanted privacy and I had to accept her explanation. On the way back to my lodgings I stopped for a drink at the *Pendulum*. There I recognized Colby. We got to talking. I told him how I had just been to Wuthersfield, and how uneasy I felt. He said he felt uneasy too. ‘Them two is a strange pair,’ he asserted. ‘And then there was the Captain’s death. Didn’t seem right, he dyin’ suddenly of a fever he’d had for years.’ I asked him if there was someone who could give us more information, a servant perhaps who still worked at the house and he mentioned Rosie.

“We went looking for her, and that took some time, and finally when we found her she gave us this rather horrifying account of your being held captive, how Thomasin had relented and let you go, and that the last she had seen of you was with her father. She was terribly afraid he meant to harm you. When we reached the bonfire site—thank God before the fire was lit—Rosie’s father denied his daughter’s story. He said that you had passed them in the gig on the way to Lyleton.”

“But you came back. . .”

“Yes, just as I got to the outer rim of the crowd it occurred to me that I had never seen a Guy Fawkes effigy wagging its head.” He smiled, but his eyes were suspiciously moist.

Richard’s body was exhumed and traces of arsenic were still found in his hair and nails. Thomasin tried to put the blame on me, of course, but Arthur, separately questioned, had already confessed. She never did admit to murder, though she was found guilty and sentenced to life imprisonment, and I suspect she never will.

For his part in the affair Dr. Lovell not only lost his license to practice but received a stiff sentence as well.

The terrible irony of it all, however, was that Malcolm, upon making inquiry, found that the Beckwith inheritance for which Thomasin would have killed me, was no more than a hundred pounds. Perhaps that was why the firm of solicitors handling the estate had made no great effort to find me.

Malcolm wanted to press charges against Rosie's father and the other participants in the attempted "witch" burning, but I convinced him that it would work great hardship on the already impoverished families of the men if they were convicted.

"You have a kind, forgiving heart," Malcolm said as we sat talking one evening in the parlor of the *Golden Eye*.

"No," I answered. "I don't have a kind heart, really. But don't you see, prison won't change those people? Their children, though, are a different matter. Ignorance and superstition usually go hand in hand and so I propose to set up a fund so that each child in the parish will receive some schooling."

"Suppose their parents refuse to accept?" Malcolm asked.

"There are a good many I know who won't dare."

He laughed. "Blackmail?"

"Certainly. And I want something special from Rosie's father."

"What?"

"Rosie. I want to make her my ward, take her from that poverty, educate her. . ."

"Do you think that is wise?"

"I think so. But Rosie will have to make the final decision."

Rosie was wildly enthusiastic. Her father, however, showed great reluctance in giving her care over to me. But since I felt no shame in hinting at possible prosecution he finally relented. I think the poor man to this day is con-

vinced that Rosie's soul has been indentured to the Devil.

"Where will you go?" Malcolm asked me when the trial was finally over and I had given Gwendolyn Cates' remains a decent burial and had closed up Wuthersfield for good.

"Back to Byrnne. I'll do what I once thought I would do before . . . well, before. Rebuild Grandmama's cottage."

"So back to the moors it is. Then we shall be traveling together."

"Oh? You are not returning to London?"

"I haven't been very much in London these past months. I've been mostly in Byrnne supervising the remodeling of Moorsend Manor."

"Oh, yes, I remember you telling us about it."

"When it's done, you won't recognize the place. Of course," he went on, "the house will be much too large for me alone. So I am thinking of taking a wife."

"Oh," I said, wondering why I should feel so oddly dismayed at the news. "Have you found a girl. . . ?"

"Indeed, I have."

"Someone from London, I suppose?"

"No, no. I discovered her a long time ago, in fact. She was peeping over a window sill at. . ."

"Malcolm!" I laughed. So Richard had been right.

"I don't know if she'll have me. . ."

"I . . . what can I say?"

He took my hand. "It's too soon, isn't it?"

"I . . . yes . . . I'm afraid it is." Richard was still too close to me, too much in my mind and my heart.

But with the passage of time as my pain and sorrow healed, I turned more and more to Malcolm until one day I knew I loved him, not in the same girlish fashion I had adored Richard (who would always have a cherished place in my memory) but with a love that was deep, the love of a girl grown into a woman at last. So we were married and I came home, really home, to the house which, in a way, was my birthright too, Moorsend Manor.

We are happy here. Rosie, now at Miss Young's, comes home on holidays. She has filled out, is growing into a very pretty young lady. As for Colby, we have learned that he, grizzled, sour, confirmed bachelor that he was, has married, a widowed tavernkeeper in Leeds, I believe. Such a surprise, just as our kind acceptance by the people of Byrnne has proved to be. Perhaps Mr. Coombs, now dead, had been right. Perhaps most of the villagers did bear a grudging respect for Grandmama. At any rate, the old ones are gone and the memory of past snubs have faded into oblivion. No one ever speaks of the witch of the moors, and for the most part, in my happiness, I have forgotten she was once supposed to be me.